Religion, Extremism and Terrorism: Is There a Link?

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Although political violence has remained at low levels in most Southeast Asian countries in recent years, warnings about the dangers of religious extremism and the threat of terrorist violence continue to circulate. Instances of actual or planned violence are often linked to the religious identities or motivations of the perpetrators. The notion of 'radicalization' is sometimes introduced to explain the shift to violent tactics. For example, a detailed study of the ten men arrested in Indonesia in April 2009 on murder and terrorism-related charges traces not only the connections and actions of this group, but also how the men came to be sufficiently 'radicalized' to cross the line between dissent and violence (ICG 2009). Although this study makes it clear that the process of radicalization it refers to was not driven by a shift in religious ideology, it is hard to disentangle the self-declared religious motives and religious identities of many of those described as extremists from other sources of motivation and more material precipitating factors leading to the adoption of violent methods.

Debates about the potential links between religion, extremism and violence have taken different forms. One area of debate has been preoccupied with explaining the adoption of violent strategies, and whether there is a potential trajectory leading individuals from religion to violent rejection of constitutional pathways to political change. A second area of enquiry has examined the proposition that religious extremism, even if not violent, can be destabilizing to established secular government and civil accommodation among social groups in pluralistic, multi-religious societies. In either case, however, is religious belief itself a significant factor? It is possible to outline a range of responses to this question, each with different policy implications.

This paper first briefly canvasses the different positions regarding the link – if any – between religion, extremism and either violent or non-violent forms of destabilization.[1] It then explores these contending arguments using two cases of current relevance in Southeast Asia: the ongoing violence in Southern Thailand, and the activities of certain Christian groups in Singapore. The paper concludes with a discussion of the conditions for productive and civil engagement of religiously-motivated groups in the broader public and political spheres.

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[1] I use the term 'extremist' rather than 'radical' because in most cases of current interest in Southeast Asia the positions of those often described as 'radical' are decidedly socially conservative. I use 'extremism' to denote being at the outer ends of a spectrum of belief, and being unwilling to engage in substantive dialogue with those holding different beliefs. As discussed later, it is this 'uncivil' aspect of extremism, rather than the intensity or passion with which a belief is held, that is potentially destabilizing.

What's Religion Got To Do With It?

'Religion is the problem'

A small number of hardline anti-religious voices have argued that religious belief *per se* is at least partially responsible for the emergence of dangerous extremism.[2] While such arguments can take different forms, among the allegedly inherently dangerous or uncivil aspects of religion are the exclusivist claims on moral truth made by most religions; the elevation of faith above reason and evidence, which makes dialogue with opposing beliefs difficult and effectively rules out appeal to scientific knowledge on issues defined in religious terms; and the tendency for religion to become a core identity marker differentiating groups, making it a potent political mobilizing resource and hence an aggravating factor in inter-group conflicts.

'Bad religion is the problem'

Among Southeast Asians and those who study the region, the idea that religious belief is in itself potentially dangerous is almost never publicly articulated, apart from in the most informal or anonymous of settings. Instead, the politicians and analysts who have sounded warnings against extremism in Southeast Asia have almost always taken care to do so from a perspective that acknowledges the legitimacy and positive role of religion. Their answer to the question of 'What does religion have to do with extremism and violence?' can be summarized in along these lines: religious belief is generally a positive force in society; most people in Southeast Asia have moderate and constructive religious beliefs; it is the deviant few who are responsible for teaching 'erroneous' versions of their faith, thereby propagating extremism and intolerance that is potentially destabilizing and may even foster violence.

This position has been articulated most clearly in relation to Islam, which even before the events of 2001 was the most intensively scrutinised and policed of religions in Southeast Asia. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, for example, was particularly associated with the development and promotion of 'Islam Hadhari', which spelt out the principles and practices for a positive engagement in society and government on the basis of Islam.[3] Malaysian leaders, including Abdullah Badawi and Mahathir Mohamed, have strongly rejected the view that terrorism is driven by religion, emphasizing instead the role of material grievances (Hamilton-Hart 2007). Both, however, also saw a need to suppress what they called deviant versions of Islam in the domestic Malaysian context.

Singapore offers the most comprehensive example of concerted policy to suppress what the government considers to be objectionable interpretations of Islam and promote favoured ones. Statements by the government board responsible for Muslim affairs, MUIS, on the risk of terrorism in Singapore outline a range of initiatives and systems to control the content and delivery of religious teaching in the country.[4] In 2004 then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong described the terrorist threat as stemming from 'a religious

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[2] British scientist Richard Dawkins is probably the most prolific and publicly visible proponent of this position. See Dawkins (2006) and other writings on his website, http://richarddawkins.net/.

[3] For the Malaysian government's official summary of the principles of Islam Hadhari, see http://www.pmo.gov.my/islamhadhari/index.php.

[4] MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura) (2003) 'Response to the White Paper on Jemaah Islamiyah.' 10 January. Available at www.muis.gov.sg/english/Media_Releases/MR2003JAN17_1.aspx?pMenu=62003.

ideology that is infused with an implacable hostility to all secular governments, especially the West, and in particular the U.S.', an ideology he identified as *salafi*.[5] A year later he maintained that 'taking the battle for the soul of Islam to the terrorists' was part of the 'ideological struggle' necessary to stem terrorism.[6] This position thus holds that religion is a positive force, *provided that* believers understand their religion correctly; its corollary is an emphasis on religious instruction, to ensure that 'correct' interpretations are propagated.

'It's not about religion'

A third position, more current in academic than policy circles, is to argue that a focus on religion is unproductive. Some versions of this approach see the religious rhetoric and declared allegiance of a number of extremist and militant groups as essentially instrumental devices used to frame grievances and mobilize support in conflict conditions. The conflicts themselves are seen in these accounts as essentially political, driven by grievances and contending interests in gaining control of people (whether as voters or crowds) and material resources.[7] Other versions are more equivocal, to the extent that they see religion as a crucial identity marker in conflicts, but can be read as ultimately placing more emphasis on politics. As also argued in some of the most persuasive and credible analyses of ethnic conflict, it is the *politicization* of identity that is implicated in outbreaks of violence (Davidson 2008). A detailed study of different forms of religious violence in Indonesia also emphasizes political context and shifting struggles for power in the country as essential for understanding the anxieties regarding religious identity that have at times taken violent form (Sidel 2006).

'Uncivil religion may be a problem'

While a focus on religion is not particularly useful if the aim is to explain political violence, a conditional link can be made between certain forms of religious belief and non-violent but potentially destabilizing extremism. As suggested by the second case study presented here, when religion enters the political realm it can lay the grounds for a mode of political engagement that is at odds with a secular, pluralistic and civil political system. In the case of what this paper calls assertive Christian extremism in Singapore, religion has formed the basis for engagement with society in ways that are inherently exclusive and potentially destabilizing. It is important to emphasize, however, that this destabilizing potential does not mark all religiously-inspired interventions into the public sphere. Whether religiously-inspired engagement is destabilizing or not is neither a matter of theology ('correct' religion vs. erroneous versions) nor of intensity of belief, but a matter of how the religious intervention is formulated.

Violence in the Thai South

Thailand's three most Southern provinces have a population that is historically, ethnically and religiously distinct from the much of the rest of the country. Because the

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[5] Goh Chok Tong (2004), 'Beyond Madrid: Winning Against Terrorism.' Speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, 6 May. Available from www.cfr.org.
[6] Goh Chok Tong (2005), 'After Amman: Uniting to Defeat Terrorism.' Speech at the opening ceremony of East-West dialogue, Barcelona, 16 November. Available from www.mfa.gov.sg.
[7] See, for example, Crenshaw 2007, Kivimaki 2007 and the discussion in relation to Southeast Asian conflict areas in Hamilton-Hart 2009.

majority population group within these provinces is both ethnic Malay and Muslim, in contrast to the Thai Buddhist majority of Thailand as a whole, there has been a common tendency to see the conflict in both ethnic and religious terms. Those apparently responsible for much of the violence directed at the Thai state or targets associated with it repeatedly emphasise their Malay Muslim identity, prompting many to focus on the Islamic framing of resistance (e.g. Liow 2006). As suggested by the equivocal tone of many accounts of religiously-framed violence, while it generally does not make sense to see conflicts as driven by religion, or fundamentally rooted in particular scriptural or theological interpretations, many are uneasy with relegating the role of religion to being merely an ancillary framing device or mobilizing instrument. Religion can be a benign, even positive force, in conflict situations yet it also can be instrumental in aggravating conflicts (Appleby 2000). Entering into a theological debate, however, about 'good' versus 'deviant' versions of religion is perilous, with significant potential for backfiring (Hamilton-Hart 2007). There is also little to no evidence that doctrinal variations in religious belief can account for decisions to cross the line between violence and other forms of dissent. Repression, the foreclosure of political channels for reform, leadership crises and social disruption emerge as far more convincing explanations for violence (e.g. Hafez 2003).

The case of violence in Thailand's Southern border provinces reinforce findings that such 'secular' factors account for the dramatic rise of violence. Since 2004, when violent incidents in the Southern provinces escalated sharply, around 3,000 people have died in the conflict, with killings attributable both to a loosely-structured insurgent movement and the government's security forces and paramilitaries. There remains a great deal of uncertainty and contention as to the nature of the groups behind the violence, their motives, their organizational structure and their ties – if any – with older insurgent groups that had been active in previous decades (e.g. Askew 2007). However, a small number of high quality studies of the conflict area go a long way to answering some key questions.[8]

There is no doubt that the nature of much of the violence attributed to the insurgent groups qualifies as 'terrorist', in that targets for assassination and other violence attest to the symbolic nature of much of the violence. Detailed work in the conflict areas by Duncan McCargo (2008) has shown, for example, that rather than securing territory, actions are designed to discredit the Thai state, provoke a heavy-handed response from security forces, and disseminate fear of collaboration among the population. There are thus some clear differences between the violence in Southern Thailand and many of Southeast Asia's other cases of insurgency and resistance against central government authority. Indeed, McCargo's work shows that there is little evidence either that groups carrying out much of the violence in Southern Thailand, or the local population from which they receive a degree of support, are committed to a serious agenda of carving out a separate state. Rather, the tendency for the Thai government since the 1940s to see all forms of dissent through the lens of 'separatism' has been a factor behind both its heavy handed responses to local calls for greater autonomy, which in turn has been a source of ongoing grievance among the local population (Thanet 2008). Meaningful political participation in democratic elections, when this opportunity has been available for the population in the Southern border provinces, has shown the potential for peaceful integration within the territorial framework of modern Thailand (Ockey 2008).

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[8] Probably the most valuable and credible studies of the conflict are the contributions in McCargo ed. 2007 and the findings from first-hand research in McCargo 2008, along with more focused enquiries carried out by Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group.

The failure of political accommodation in Southern Thailand has not been rooted either in the demographic makeup of the provinces or driven by religious concerns. In addition to the heavy hand of recurring periods of government assimilation and repression, the co-option and failures of the local political elite emerges as a key factor.[9] As McCargo's work shows, in many ways, the seeds for the upsurge in violence in recent years can be connected to both the national political crises of Thailand, and a local crisis of leadership – which has also included divisions and loss of authority associated with traditional religious leadership and religious institutions. While religion has obviously been invoked, purposefully circulated stories of local grievance that dwell on both historical events and recent violent actions by the security forces dominate. Notably, far from being in any way '*salafy*' or based on purist textual readings of Islam, the resistance movement is associated with much more mystical forms of religious practice and belief rooted in local traditions and ethnic Malay identity. Further, the government's concern with regulating Islamic education to ensure 'proper' versions of religious teaching prevailed has contributed to undermining the legitimacy of local authority figures and institutions.

This brief review of the conflict in Thailand's Southern border provinces reinforces findings from a wide array of studies of political violence that resort to violence is a strategic choice, albeit one that may seem to be forced on the participants, made possible and attractive by conditions in which struggle is taking place. Key to these conditions are, first, the legitimacy of political institutions and leadership figures; and, second, state capacity, particularly the government's ability to perform police and judicial functions. While religious belief and anxieties about religious identity may be fused with the call for resistance, there is no evidence that religious belief (or any variant of religious interpretation) is a significant factor that can explain the transition to violence.

Christian Extremism in Singapore
The Aware Affair
The idea that Christian extremists could be operating in Singapore became a topic of contention in April 2009, when an unprecedented takeover of a non-governmental organization was subjected to the full force of mainstream media attention and extensive scrutiny on the internet. The takeover first came to public attention in early April, when it was reported that control over a women's rights organization, the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), had been taken by a group of women who had only joined the organization in the three months immediately preceding its Annual General Meeting at the end of March. At this meeting, almost all members of the Executive Council (Exco) of Aware were voted out of office and replaced with newcomers. According to the former president of Aware, 'about 80 of the 102 who turned up [to the AGM] were new members who joined between January and March this year' (*Straits Times*, 10 April 2009).

Despite initial denials of any pre-meditated takeover by the new members of the Exco, and a refusal to talk about their religious beliefs, media investigation and then public admission brought to light several facts about the takeover group: that six of them, including the woman who was appointed as president of Aware soon after the AGM, attended the same church; that this church, the Church of Our Saviour (COOS), was associated with evangelical and anti-homosexual initiatives; that some of the new Exco members had earlier publicly

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[9] This paragraph is based on McCargo 2008, especially chapters 1, 2 and 4.

campaigned against a proposal (in 2007) to reform aspects of Singapore's penal code to end discrimination against sexual minorities; and that the takeover had been instigated by senior lawyer and former dean of the then University of Singapore Law School, Thio Su Mien, mother of Nominated MP Thio Li-An (who had figured prominently in the law reform debate of 2007) and reported member of COOS (*Straits Times*, 18 April 2009). Thio Su Mien later revealed herself as the 'feminist mentor' of the takeover group, alleged that Aware had been 'promoting homosexuality' (a charge strongly denied by the former leaders of the group, who maintained their position had always been one of non-discrimination) and raised the spectre of a 'generation of lesbians' bringing about the downfall of Singapore. Emails allegedly written by her, calling for the infiltration of Aware in order to change it, were circulated on the internet (*Straits Times*, 24 April 2009; Yawning Bread 2009b). This, as implied in the mainstream media and heatedly decried in the blogoshere, could sensibly be described as a religiously-motivated takeover of a secular organization (e.g. Yawning Bread 2009a).

It did not last long. Amid a snowstorm of media coverage, the membership of Aware multiplied in the lead-up to an Extraordinary General Meeting held on 2 May. At the meeting (tumultuous and passionate by Singapore standards), a vote of no confidence in the new Exco was carried 1414 votes to 761, a Council consisting mostly of 'Old Guard' members was voted in, and the takeover group announced their resignation.

In what can be read as closing commentary on the episode, the Deputy Prime Minister publicly affirmed that Singapore was a 'conservative society' and that challenges to the idea that 'a heterosexual stable family, is the norm and the building block' of society should not be made. He also noted that the Aware takeover 'caused many qualms among non-Christians, and also among Christians who believed that this was an unwise move in a multiracial, multi-religious society. It was much more dangerous because now religion was also getting involved, and it was no longer just the issue of homosexuality.' He affirmed the rebuke earlier delivered by the National Council of Churches to senior pastor of COOS, Derek Hong, who had reportedly called for support for the takeover group in his sermons. The message was clear: religion and politics must be kept separate, 'the political arena must also be a secular one' and both sides 'must now calm down and move on' (quoted in *Straits Times*, 15 May 2009). On the ostensible issue prompting the takeover, however, the government effectively endorsed the concerns of the takeover group, by retracting its earlier position and suspending Aware as a provider of sexual education services in schools.

A Window on Christian Extremism, or Liberal Conspiracy Theory?
While the government clearly wished to leave the episode behind, the short-lived takeover of Aware invited scrutiny of some of the groups and networks associated with evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity in Singapore. Several internet blogs described the takeover of Aware as a case of 'steeplejacking', a process of supplanting the leadership of a church by apostolic groups associated with the Christian Right in the United States. One internet article, for example, provided an extensive catalogue of links and similarities between some of Singapore's Pentecostal churches, including some of those associated with the Aware takeover, and 'New Apostolic Reformation' groups in the U.S. and Australia (Dogemporer 2009).[10]

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[10] Finding a label for such groups is difficult, as their self-referencing is not consistent. 'New Apostolic' is a frequently used umbrella term. They are among a range of groups loosely associated with the Christian Right that has been influential in the U.S. Republican party (Berlet 1995). More militant groups have remained

While the significance of these alleged links is open to contestation, ties to American apostolic leaders and other foreign missionaries are attested to in an inside account of the growth of the evangelical revivalist protestant churches in Singapore. As well as describing his own connections and mentioning visits of several western evangelical preachers, including the teaching of the influential American advocate of 'spiritual warfare', Peter Wagner, the author notes in passing that in the early 1970s his church had until then been under the care of missionaries, 'preserving and protecting this youthful evangelical congregation from the "contamination" of the other liberal, Anglo-Catholic influences in the diocese then' (Wong 2002). The literature and newsletters put out by many of Singapore's evangelical groups frequently refer to the teachings of preachers associated with the New Apostolic movement, as well as seminars and prayer sessions featuring such speakers in Singapore.

As well as noting these links, what caught the attention of several liberal, rights-oriented Singaporean bloggers is the self-declared agenda of influencing Singapore society held by some Christian groups. For example, the 'lovesingapore' initiative aimed at unifying as well as promoting protestant Christianity has been led by individuals associated with some of the large protestant 'mega-churches' (as well as the senior pastor of COOS, whose sermons featured in the Aware affair). Lovesingapore held a major conference in May 2009, under the banner of Transformation 09. Its conference material lists its 'transformational strategies' as including the call to 'raise intercessory prayer for each of these 7 gates of cultural influence: Arts and Entertainment, Business, Science and Technology, Communications & Media, Disadvantaged and Marginalized, Education and School, Family & Home, Government and Leadership' (LoveSingapore2009). Similarly, the national director of the evangelical group Navigators Singapore (an offshoot of its American parent), referred approvingly to the facilitator at the Go Forth Missions Conference as saying that 'we could very quickly impact and transform a nation if God's people could plant themselves in eight areas of society (A to H): A - Arts, culture, and entertainment; B - Business and finance; C - Church / Religion; D - Distribution and Communications (media); E – Education; F – Families; G – Government; H – Health. He also noted that 'Our Navigator heritage of helping lay people make generational labourers places us in a strategic role to partner with the Body of Christ to reach Singapore, Asia, and the world' (Chua 2008).

For many critics of the Aware takeover, the attempt was just one example of how this strategy of influence society and government via infiltration could play out. Another organization to attract scrutiny has been the Singapore incarnation of Focus on the Family, a U.S.-originated organization that, in most countries in which it operates, is openly evangelical and known for aggressive political lobbying on issues such as homosexuality, abortion, sex education and against child protection laws. In Singapore, however, Focus on the Family gained registration as a non-religious organization, even though its links with its American parent and Focus on the Family groups in other countries are quite apparent. It has also received support from several local businesses and government ministries. The Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports, for example, allegedly has subsidised its parenting workshops (called 'Parenting With Confidence'), and the Ministry of Education has contracted with them to provide educational services to schools. One of the leaders of Focus on the Family Singapore is allegedly a member of the same church, COOS, that gained

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outside, or on the periphery, of the political system (George and Wilcox 1992). For more current evidence of these groups' activities, from a critical perspective, see http://www.theocracywatch.org/.

attention in the Aware takeover, and a COOS newsletter describes a Focus on the Family 'Parenting With Confidence' workshop as an opportunity for 'outreach' (Yawning Bread 2009a; *The Saviour's Times*, October-December 2006). The president of Aware briefly installed by the takeover group, Josie Lau, also a member of the congregation at COOS and an executive with Singapore's DBS bank, had earlier selected Focus on the Family as the recipient of the bank's Christmas charity drive, which had led to a letter writing campaign in protest.

There are good grounds for caution before leaping to any conclusion about the infiltration of government and supposedly secular societal groups by 'extremist' Christians. Certainly, we have little reason to think that the militant tactics of some extremist American Christian groups have been – or are likely to be – imported into Singapore. While those advocating a more liberal democratic and non-discriminatory legal framework in Singapore certainly find the substantive agenda of groups such as the Aware takeover group distasteful and contrary to their own, it does not follow that they are necessarily de-stabilizing. Indeed, they can be construed as a stabilizing, status quo force in a country where liberal, rights-based democracy is explicitly rejected by the government, and where the social conservatism of most evangelical Christian churches is largely in harmony with the government's propagation of supposedly 'Asian' conservative moral values. There is also a great deal of congruence between the state's agenda of capitalist growth and the individualistic, prosperity-as-God's-blessing theology of some of the large Pentecostal churches (Goh 2008). And indeed, just as the conservative 'pro-family' orientation of Focus on the Family has apparently been accepted by government ministries, the congruence in orientation has allowed for other partnerships:

> 'the theology of blessing leads pentecostals to acquiesce in the status quo to enjoy the fruits of decades of Asian development, particularly with the rise of Asian middle-class consumption, and display the ostentatious consumption as a sign of God's presence to revive the church. The pentecostal is not to be satisfied with the personal knowledge that his success shows he has God's grace; he is called to display the success to edify and evangelize. This is the reason New Creation [church] spectacularly and controversially invested 280 million dollars in 2007 to partner state-linked property giant and transnational corporation Capitaland to develop a 660-million dollar "lifestyle hub" to serve the government-planned science research parks concentrated near the National University' (Goh 2008).

The congruence is bolstered by a degree of 'Christianization' of government and positions of influence in society, which superficially suggests that the goal of reaching the 'gates of influence' identified by the groups cited above has at least partially been reached. For example, a tally of the religious affiliation of MPs (not cabinet ministers, for whom there is no systematic information) shows that self-identified Christians are disproportionately over-represented in parliament. While constituting about 14 percent of the Singaporean population according to the 2000 census, Christians make up 44 percent of the parliamentarians whose religion affiliation is publicly known, a four-fold over-representation (Yawning Bread 2007). There is of course nothing necessarily 'extremist' about being Christian, and no claim is made here about the orientation of Singapore parliamentarians. However, Christianity is not only Singapore's fastest growing religion, its growth over the last two decades has been mainly in the self-proclaimed evangelical and pentecostal churches (Goh 2008). While far from homogenous, and with many divisions and internal debates surrounding pentecostalism in particular, the stream of Protestantism dominant in Singapore

is markedly evangelical, and many of Singapore's elite schools are protestant mission schools under the direction of openly evangelical leadership.[11]

Given Singapore's system of meritocracy, it is reasonable to suppose that these elite schools supply a disproportionate number of those who go on to achieve positions of influence in government and society. While their intake is not restricted to children of any particular denomination or indeed to Christians, it should not be surprising if many of those who go through this educational experience do emerge with sympathy for the kind of Christianity to which they were exposed. Evangelical groups are also active on university campuses, another obvious supply ground for the nation's leaders. One does not, therefore, need any conspiracy theory to explain the over-representation of Christians in parliament, or the many examples of senior people in public service and business who are associated with evangelical Christian movements, such as Campus Crusade for Christ or the revivalist Protestantism that characterizes much of the growth in the Christian population.[12]

Until recently, few challenges to the government's position that the political sphere must be kept secular have been openly voiced. But the strict separation between religion and politics places real restrictions on those who find such a separation contradicts their core religious beliefs. A letter allegedly written by a Christian and circulated on the internet gives voice to a claim to participate, on religious terms, in politics and secular organizations:

> Dear Most Revd. Dr John Chew
> 'I disagree with many church leaders' stand that Christians should not get involved in a secular organisation like AWARE. Aren't the organisations we work for, the schools we attend secular? We cannot hold leadership just because our faith and beliefs belong to that of Christ? And if my Christian beliefs form the very core of who I am, why are you asking me not to exercise them in the world I live in? How relevant then is my faith if I am asked to keep them within the four walls of the church?…. Our churches have done a good job teaching us the biblical truth and the word of God. Most of our children have this knowledge in their heads. However, equipping them with knowledge alone is insufficient. We need to demonstrate to our children how to apply God's truths, how to stand up for them and if need be, fight for these truths…. Christians have to be ready to stand up and fight for our faith. Otherwise we would be useless in God's army because He cannot use us. To be ready and useful, we must start to learn what it means to be steadfast and to live out our faith. Speaking up in defence of our beliefs is a start.'[13]

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[11] A fascinating first-person account is provided in Wong 2002. He notes that among the early revivalist evangelical leaders in the 1970s was Tan Teng Wai, who 'was appointed the founding principal of St. Andrew's Junior College (SAJC) in 1978' and then hosted his rapidly growing 'house-church' at the school. He provides a description of the further growth and establishment of new revivalist churches ('church planting') and notes that, 'Six of the present congregations meet at the campus of SAJC.' Wong himself was appointed Director of Anglican Schools in 2001, and as such described himself in these terms: 'I oversee the 9 growing and fast-changing Anglican Schools and 12 kindergartens and child-care centers in our Diocese, plus the pioneering mission work of church-planting as the Dean of Indonesia, and also serving as the Honorary General Secretary of the National Council of Churches' (Wong 2002).

[12] To note just a few examples: Campus Crusade Asia Ltd counts among its board of directors a former board member of Singapore's elite Anglo-Chinese School and a retired Rear Admiral (and former member of the Public Utilities Board), as well as a board member of the non-governmental Boys Brigade. See the website of the Singapore Campus Crusade for Christ, http://www.sccc.sg/about-us/ccal-board-of-directors.html. Thio Gim Hock, husband of Thio Su Mien the prominent lawyer and former Dean of the law school whose role stirred so much controversy in the Aware takeover, was reported as being the chief executive officer of property investor Overseas Union Enterprise (*Straits Times*, 18 April 2009).

[13] The authenticity of this letter is open to question, but the sentiments it expresses are worth considering in any case. The letter is reproduced in the comments section of a Singapore website that aims to voice 'alternative' opinions. See http://wayangparty.com/?p=9047.

Is there any reason why such voices should not be welcomed in the political 'marketplace of ideas'?

'Extremist' Elements

The most obvious potentially destabilizing aspect of bringing religion into the public and political sphere is the reaction that it may provoke in a multi-religious society with an avowedly secular government. The antagonism provoked by the attempt to takeover Aware, which prompted many who until then had had no interest in Aware or its work, testifies to a strong reservoir of opposition within Singapore to the injection of religion into what had been 'secular' space. Its polarizing potential was noted by the government, which strongly reiterated its position on the need for separating religion and politics. There is little scope for this kind of overt conflict to escalate, however, given the government's extensive arsenal of legislative and other measures to control organized religion and ensure the maintenance of 'religious harmony' (Tan, E. 2008). The more plausible threat presented by extremist elements within the Christian population is that their growing assertiveness may bring about a more subtle corrosion of Singapore's secular public sphere and multi-religious accommodation. Three characteristics of sections within the Christian community in Singapore are noteworthy.

First, a current of evangelical Christianity with a declared aim of gaining converts and also transforming society clearly does exist in Singapore. The goal of expanding the Christian population in Singapore and using the country as base from which to evangelize in the region is overtly espoused by several groups. For example, The Singapore branch of the Navigators describes the group as 'an apostolic, multicultural partnership raised by God to advance the Gospel of Jesus and His kingdom into the nations through generations of labourers, living and discipling among the lost.' It notes that almost a third of its global staff 'minister outside their own culture and among a different ethnic people from their own.'[14] Similarly, the Singapore Campus Crusade for Christ traces its roots to the American founders of the movement and claims that 'From the beginning, God's calling for this ministry was to, "Win the campus for Christ today; win the world for Christ tomorrow." Its operations in Singapore started in 1972 and 'Today, we have campus ministries in every university and polytechnic, including a growing movement among junior colleges and secondary schools.' Its vision is described in these terms: 'Movements everywhere so that everyone knows someone who truly follows Jesus….By everywhere, we mean exactly that; every ministry seeking to reach the strategic sectors of our society to reach every lost soul in our generation and taking the reality of Jesus Christ worldwide.' It claims to oversee 'about 1200 disciples on 15 campuses (Uni, Poly and JCs). Together, we seek to contribute to the development of 150,000 students – the future leaders of our country and the world.'[15]

Another Singapore Christian website reproduces an article from an American source titled 'Politics: Should Christians Get Involved?' which calls for involvement in these terms: 'What is our task? According to Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20, we are to go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey God in every area of life. It is hard to imagine that Jesus would have wanted the political realm to be excluded. We must disciple people to make godly decisions about government.' The article concludes with a quote that, "Only through a

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[14] Quoted from The Navigators Singapore website, at http://navigators.org.sg/about. The 'lost' appears to be the term used by the group to refer to the unconverted.

[15] All quotes taken from the website of the Singapore Campus Crusade for Christ, at http://www.sccc.sg/.

return to faith in God, as God revealed Himself to man in Jesus Christ, can modern man and his society find redemption from the tyranny of evil."'[16] Lovesingapore, the organization behind the Transformation 09 conference referred to above describes itself as being 'about God's greatest glory expressed through - a life changed [,] a church revived [,] a nation transformed [,]a world evangelized [.] This is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.'[17]

In a country where the maintenance of religious harmony is zealously guarded, it is surprising that these statements – calling for transformation of the country in terms that appear to give no space to other religions or the non-religious (except as 'lost' souls or fodder to be harvested) – have not provoked more concern. One reason may be that, within Singapore at least, expansionist rhetoric has been tempered with caution in terms of actual proselytizing, a caution that is required under the terms of Singapore's legal framework governing religious expression.

Fewer restrictions apply to overseas evangelical activity. The international website of Campus Crusade for Christ describes Singapore as a place where, 'Christians have an influence in society larger than their national percentage, and Singapore has become a key Christian base and mission-sending country.'[18] As noted in another account, 'Inspired by Billy Graham's "prophecy" that Singapore is the Antioch of Asia, pentecostal spiritual mapping has placed Singapore at the center for spreading Christianity in Asia. Believing that a "spiritual beachhead" has already been established in Singapore, [Singaporean church leader] Khong prophesized there would be a "major harvest wave" of conversions seven symbolic years into the LoveSingapore movement in 2001, which would then inaugurate the fanning out of the movement into the region from the Christianized nation' (Goh 2008). Although no direct link to Singapore groups have been documented, the potentially explosive impact of conversions is fairly evident. It was cited, for example, as a major factor behind the 'radicalization' of those arrested on terrorism charges in Indonesia in April 2009 (ICG 2009).

A second potentially destabilizing characteristic of some Christian elements is a mode of reasoning that is fundamentally corrosive of secular public debate when it is brought to bear on issues that affect the wider society. The issue is not that they are religiously-inspired, it is that their reasoning is entirely based on a religious perspective.[19] God's word (their interpretation of it) is presented as complete and sufficient, a position that inherently rules out the possibility of secular debate. Any dialogue, if entertained at all, must be theological. For example, the Navigators list as among their core values the 'truth and sufficiency of the Scriptures for the whole of life.'[20] The corrosive implications have perhaps been masked by the apparently innocuous (from the perspective of the Singapore government) political

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[16] Article by Jeffry Myers dated 16 June 2007, available at
http://www.christianhub.com.sg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=34.
[17] See lovesingapore, 'Curious About Us.' Available at http://www.lovesingapore.org.sg/ . As of May 2009, its chairman was identified as Lawrence Khong, leader of one of Singapore's mega-churches, and among the other names listed under 'Curious About Us' was Derek Hong, senior pastor of the Church of Our Saviour. The links to American New Apostolic figures are fairly clear. As noted in another study, 'The movement began when Khong met American preacher Peter Wagner in the first International Spirit Warfare Network in Seoul in 1993. Khong subsequently assumed formal leadership of the Spiritual Warfare Network in Singapore, which was already meeting regularly but informally' (Goh 2008).
[18] See the website of Campus Crusade for Christ International, at
http://www.ccci.org/locations/asia/singapore/index.aspx.
[19] For discussion of an example in the Singapore context see Tan, K. 2008.
[20] See The Navigators Singapore website at http://navigators.org.sg/about/calling

agenda these groups have espoused when they have made interventions in public life. Aside from hot-button 'morality' issues such as sex education and homosexuality, there is little indication of any concrete political agenda at all. There is a lot of talk about bringing about God's kingdom, but very little on what that might look like in practice.

The substantively empty political agenda is consistent with a noticeable lack of any analysis of political or economic processes that might be thought to affect issues of traditional Christian concern, such as poverty and welfare. For many pentecostal believers, 'real life problems are seen as symptoms of demonic activity that require disciplined prayer, even fasting, and, very often, the group mobilization of spiritual power to defeat them' (Goh 2008). The founder of City Harvest Church (one of Singapore's relatively new mega-churches) is reported to believe that 'demonic oppression did not reside in inequitable structures of political and economic power but in actual demonic possession of the suffering individual in interaction with his immediate social environment, through unclean places, animals and divination practices' (Goh 2008). While apparently 'non-political', there are in fact profound political implications of this kind of religious reasoning making its way into public life. Quite apart from the substantive agenda pursued (with which one may agree or disagree), the very lack of any substantive reasoning intelligible in non-religious terms virtually rules out possibilities for productive debate with either other religious groups or secular ones.

A third extremist aspect of some Christian groups in Singapore is a tendency towards intolerance and lack of readiness to compromise, expressed not only in the commitment to evangelism but also militant rhetoric. In some cases, those expressing opposing viewpoints are literally described as being the 'enemy' or even as 'Satanic', which is hardly the basis for a civil exchange of views. The flavour of such attitudes is captured by an entry on a local website:

'I see that this battle against the forces of the enemy is just beginning over the environment in Singapore…the enemy will be back very soon to attempt to break through the spiritual domain in Singapore… the evil one is very swift in attacking and overpowering when God's people are lazy and indifferent…. If we want the Spirit of God to continue reigning over this country and in its laws, we as His people need to take up our weapons of warfare and to start interceding for our beloved country and our generations to come. It is our responsibility to stand in the gap and I pray that we will all be found diligent in answering this call, for our own sakes. This is just the beginning of the war that Satan is bringing more obviously to the frontlines.'[21]

Similar language and attitudes are brought to light in work by Daniel Goh. He quotes church leader Lawrence Khong (of the lovesingapore initiative), as telling Christians who "do not like warfare imagery or terminology" that "like it or not, Scripture calls us to take stand and fight as armed warriors against the spiritual rulers of darkness". "Loving and exalting Jesus, while we love and bless others in His name," writes Khong, "will defeat the devil and his schemes." Goh goes on to note that 'Khong's war cry is not mere fiery rhetoric delivered for effect in the midst of pentecostal exuberance. His Church is organized into cell groups "structured like the military", with three to four cell groups of around 10-20 people forming a sub-zone headed by a "volunteer zone supervisor pastor", ten of which form a zone of 300-600 people … Khong believes that some Christian warriors will literally "die for Jesus in this wartime", but "God will still have the victory" whether "through martyrdom or

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[21] See a blog entry on a Singapore Christian website, at
http://www.christianhub.com.sg/CHblog/2007/10/25/homosexuality-and-singapore/.

aggressive assaults on enemy territory". Khong is raising a "spiritual army that captures territory for God"' (Goh 2008).

Such language is certainly not the public face of any Christian group in Singapore when it addresses a secular audience. It is, however, readily observable in in-house publications of some groups. Together with the open links to individuals and organizations associated with militant Christian groups in the U.S., where the language of warfare, religious armies and earthly battles with the devil is widespread, it does suggest an attitude of intolerance that qualifies as extremist among some sections of the Christian community in Singapore.

Conclusions

In recent years, public discussion of terrorism has focused almost exclusively on terrorist acts carried out by self-identified Muslims. As terrorism analysts attempted to add analytic content to otherwise descriptive accounts, several of them made connections with broader discussions, scholarly and otherwise, of so-called Islamic radicalism and militancy. In turn, this has often been joined to consideration of the civil and uncivil ways Islam as a religion can enter the political sphere (e.g. Hefner 2000, 2005). We now have a large number of studies of political Islam, political violence involving Muslims, and a range of revivalist, purist and 'hardline' Islamic movements. Many of these are deeply flawed, based on alarmist, superficial and often implicitly anti-Islamic readings of their subject matter (Sidel 2008; Hamilton-Hart 2005). An increasing number, among them the works cited here, are extremely valuable examples of meticulous research and analysis. The result of such attention having been devoted to Islam and violence, however, is that collectively we are much less attuned to what can be called extremist manifestations of other religions, and how they may affect the political sphere.

This paper's preliminary sketch of extremist Christian elements in Singapore is thus an attempt to address an issue that thus far seems to have drawn little attention. It is important, however, not to repeat the mistakes that have been made in alarmist studies of Islam and politics. More in-depth and contextualised study than is possible here is necessary before we can reach firm conclusions about the extent of extremist beliefs, the factors that condition how they are (or are not) acted upon, and the ways in which evangelical efforts, both in Singapore and using Singapore as a base, are actually practiced.

In place of such conclusions, two observations are offered here. First, bland injunctions calling for 'tolerance' and the need to keep religion out of politics are inherently limited in effectiveness, even when backed up with the considerable force of Singapore's stock of legislative and administrative controls on civil society in general and religion in particular. Ideas that cannot find public expression are unlikely to change in the direction of tolerance by being driven underground or restricted for circulation among the like-minded. Secondly, there is no inherent reason why religiously-inspired ideals should not be expressed in secular terms in the realm of political action. Perhaps paradoxically, Singapore also provides an example of how an earlier generation of Christian activists sought to put their values in action, in this case by organizing industrial workers and aiming to give collective voice to under-privileged citizens and foreign workers (Barr 2008). Famously, the attempt was ultimately met with a government crackdown and multiple arrests under the ISA. Perhaps lost from view (or not) is the potential these groups demonstrated for religiously-

inspired ideals to lead to inclusive and secular political engagement. While theologically-derived in terms of underlying values, the substantive agendas that emerged from, for example, their analysis of the effects of global capitalism on poverty, provide strong foundations for cross-religious and secular collaboration – or contestation. The contrast with evangelistic calls to transform society by conversion and casting out demons could not be more stark.

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