

## MY THOUGHTS

# Youth interfaith efforts can make a difference

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

SETTING aside preparations for the upcoming examination season at the National University of Singapore (NUS), a group of friends and I from the NUS University Scholars Programme (USP) and NUS Interfaith Club organised an interfaith forum recently.

With support from the USP administration and the NUS Malay studies department, the forum turned out well, engaging more than 30 students in a lively and engaging discussion about religion here.

Yet a sour note was struck when a

classmate voiced a common misconception about youth interfaith efforts – we are too young to make a difference, especially when our peers are uninterested. He asked why we had gone to all this trouble. After all, we are not religious leaders, and it's not like we can convince our peers that learning about other faiths is important.

But while youth interfaith leaders may not have the experience of their senior counterparts, they do have passion and, more importantly, the technical know-how to combat ignorance and intolerance where the real battle is being fought in this day and age: the Internet.

Just last month, Florida pastor Terry Jones staged a public burning of the Quran, triggering large demonstrations in Afghanistan. Within days, young people across American campuses created online campaigns against Mr Jones, effectively demonstrating that he was part of a radical fringe that was not representative of American mainstream opinion.

In Singapore, youth interfaith efforts are urgently needed, if the attitudes of the young towards faith are anything to go by.

In her study on secondary school students' attitudes towards religion here, educator Phyllis Chew discovered that typi-

cal sentiments included, among other things, the notion that Islam is a religion in which "marriages take place in the void deck", Zoroastrianism is the "sign of Zorro" and Buddhism is about "filial piety".

It would appear that young people here do not understand the religions practised in their own backyards.

As Mr Mohamed Imran, a postgraduate student and one of the speakers at our forum, mentioned, we live in a society in which even MRT announcements urge us to beware of suspicious persons. In an environment that normalises suspicion, even a flippant blog post by an ignorant teenager about religion can threaten to

destabilise societal fault lines.

Perhaps schools can go further in teaching students more about the faiths practised by their fellow Singaporeans, without compromising anyone's beliefs. Take the model used in Britain, where students study comparative religion – surveying the country's main faiths, their histories, beliefs and rituals.

More collaborative activities between young people of different faiths might also be beneficial. Indeed, Ms Angie Monksfield, vice-president (member affairs) of the Buddhist Fellowship, noted that even the slightest efforts in interfaith cooperation can have a ripple effect.

Perhaps our little forum made just such a ripple, influencing some of our peers to think a little deeper about the role of interfaith efforts in Singapore today. Who knows just how deep its impact can really be.

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