

He chooses to be advocate of inter-faith dialogue

WHEN videos of Christian pastor Rony Tan making disparaging remarks about Buddhists and Taoists were circulated last February, the National University of Singapore (NUS) Buddhist Fellowship sprang into action.

In a widely circulated piece, its student members rebutted Pastor Tan's "misconceptions" about Buddhists and their faith. The note received hundreds of comments on Facebook and was re-published by campus publications, notes Mr Ow Yeong Wai Kit, its president.

He is also vice-president of the Inter-Faith Club on campus.

The Ministry of Home Affairs later revealed that Internal Security Department officers had cautioned Pastor Tan about the inappropriateness of his remarks.

As Wai Kit saw it, the blunt force of the state had stepped in, and religious groups on the national stage shrank from the fray.

When asked later why the Inter-Religious Organisation had not taken action although it also received complaints about Pastor Tan, its leadership said that its duties do not extend beyond notifying

the respective religions involved.

To Wai Kit, 22, the incident was an example of the imbalance between the state and civil society groups when it comes to inter-faith issues.

Although the English literature major believes that the state must remain vigilant over inter-religious tension, he emphasises that civil society groups must "grow up".

The Government's stance on inter-religious tension, he notes, is that it cannot afford "a single error". Hence, the last few years have seen a number of people being arrested for inappropriate Facebook or blog posts.

But Wai Kit believes that OB markers alone do not make a resilient fabric of inter-faith tolerance. He would like to see civil society groups step up to the plate, whether through dialogues, mediation or educational materials.

That would show the state that civil society has "the courage, determination and wherewithal to conduct their affairs responsibly", he says.

Remaining silent about sensitive topics



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can also lead to blanket ignorance about other religions. He laments, for example, a recent study by educator Phyllis Chew of secondary students' attitudes towards religions.

They include the notion that Islam is a religion in which "marriages take place in the void deck" and Buddhism is about "filial piety".

The NUS Inter-Faith Club organises dialogues on campus which aim not just to

educate but also to provide an opportunity for students of different faiths to mix – and perhaps become friends.

He is emphatic that passionate advocates for inter-faith dialogue, like himself, cannot "wait for the state" to liberalise the way it handles topics or situations which may lead to inter-faith tension.

By growing stronger and more vibrant, people and groups can influence the Government to allow communities to work

through these situations on their own.

He believes that Singapore society has already come a long way since the unhappy episodes of the past, like the race riots of the 1960s.

"They say that if you want to keep your friends, don't talk about politics and religion," he quips. "But I think they are precisely what we must talk about. If not they remain under the surface and start festering."

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