

READING

Singapore wants to put an end to a deeply contested online phenomenon by introducing what legal experts and observers say would be the world's first law against cancel culture.

Over the past year, Singapore's government has been "looking at ways to deal with cancel culture," a spokesperson told CNN - amid what some say is a brewing culture war between gay rights supporters and the religious right following the recent decriminalisation of homosexuality in the largely conservative city-state.

Authorities said they were "examining existing related laws and legislation" after receiving "feedback" from conservative Christians who expressed fears about being cancelled for their views by vocal groups online.

"People ought to be free to express their views without fear of being attacked on both sides," law minister K Shanmugam said in an interview with state media outlets in August.

John Dickson (studio)

That's an excerpt from a 2023 CNN article about plans to establish the first laws against so-called cancel culture.

Of course, what cancel culture actually is is part of what makes legislating against it so tricky. That's what legal experts in Singapore were trying to pin down in the article ... without much success!

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The first thing any law tackling cancel culture must do, would be to define the act of cancelling - an extremely complex challenge according to legal experts, given how contentious cancel culture can be.

According to Eugene Tan, an associate law professor from the Singapore Management University, there remains “no accepted definition” of cancelling.

“All too often, incidents are interpreted, described or remembered by people in different ways.”

“With cancel culture, things can spread immediately online and people’s reputations can be ruined in a matter of hours,” said criminal lawyer Joshua Tong. “It is clear that traditional legal processes are not suitable for cancel scenarios ...”

John Dickson (studio)

The act of ‘cancelling’ is destructive and slippery. And it moves so quickly the law has trouble keeping up ... or sorting out a remedy.

Perhaps that’s what makes ‘cancelling’ so effective: it is an amorphous thing that sits outside current laws.

Amy Orr-Ewing: So I think I would define cancel culture as being less about upholding kind of existing laws that protect civil rights and more about enforcing unwritten moral codes so that someone who crosses a line of what is deemed acceptable in terms of a view or expressing an opinion is, is not Not just subject to law, because what they state might not be illegal, but they're subject to sort of social censure.

John Dickson (studio)

That’s my friend Amy Orr-Ewing, a theologian and author of books like Why Trust the Bible and Where is God in all the suffering?

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She gained a first in Theology from Oxford - which is like getting straight As, but harder - especially in a place that's been teaching theology for a thousand years. Anyway, after completing a master's at Kings College London, she returned to Oxford for her doctorate examining the life and thought of the English powerhouse writer and thinker Dorothy L Sayers. Amy, of course, was the guest for our Sayers episode last year (episode 98).

Amy Orr-Ewing: You might see it on social media where there's a huge pile on of trolls, but more subtly you might find yourself ostracized or [00:01:00] shunned in some way, or even have people seeking to get you fired or de-platformed, um, for expressing an opinion that goes against the grain of what is seen as socially acceptable. So it's a kind of unwritten moral code being enforced.

John Dickson: Hmm. Um, what for you are the clearest examples? If you can be specific because. I have come across a bunch of people who say it doesn't exist. Or, the other way is, it's always been like this, there's [00:01:30] no difference. What do you think are the clearest examples of what we're now calling cancel culture?

Amy Orr-Ewing: So, I mean, here in Britain, I think probably the clearest context for this debate is around the question of what it means to be a woman and whether the category of biological, um, A biological female exists, and so you might look at the treatment of J. K. Rowling, who's obviously got enormous power and huge platform, but cancel culture would be the massive impetus to get her books not being read, to get her de-platformed from speaking, to get her to be seen as someone who's morally dubious.

John Dickson (studio)

We'll put some links in the show notes for some useful background on JK Rowling and the controversy surrounding her.

Amy Orr-Ewing: So, there isn't a use of the law against her, it's not like a civil case is being brought against her, but because she's expressed views around um, protecting safe spaces for women, you know, she needs to be cancelled, she needs to be stopped, people shouldn't read her books, they shouldn't invite her to, to, to come and speak and they wouldn't, you shouldn't be influenced by her .

So it's a, it's a kind of pervasive sense then that this is someone who's a bit of a dangerous person, a bit of a risky person. Or a more extreme example, you might look at a philosopher like Kathleen Stock, who eventually did lose her job at the University of Sussex. A philosopher in Britain here Um, who, um, yet again expressed views around that issue of what it means to be, to be a woman and female safe spaces and was, was harassed with, um, on a lot of online threats and then, you know, people boycotting her lectures, lots of posters being put up at her university, just making it.

unpleasant for her to be able to continue to live her life and do her job. So it's not an enforcement of law against somebody, but it's a, it's a, it's a, it's a, a kind of pervasive shunning socially that happens both in the physical world and on the internet.

I think for me, um, One of the most interesting things underlying, there are lots of things underlying cancel culture but one of the most interesting things is this whole sort of sociological interest in what you might call intersectionality, a way of seeing the world that centers Human experiences of injustice and the way that our different experiences of injustice might intersect differently for different ones of us, and that being definitional around what it means to be human.

So, um, I might, I might be female, so I've got. I've got some kind of experience of injustice working in a man's world, but I'm white so I'm privileged. If I were a person of colour, I would have another layer of intersecting social injustice within this way of seeing the world. And so cancel culture arises from people's experience of injustice, feeling very potent and very present and very close to our sense of human identity. And

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so when someone transgresses or hurts or harms us in an area of, of our lived experience of injustice, you know, we, we might not have recourse to law, but we have recourse to cancel culture. And I think that's, that's why it's so pervasive.

John Dickson: And you, you reckon cancel culture. It gets quite a few things right, like it's coming from good motives, and in what sense? Give us a sense of what cancel culture is hitting upon that is, um, that is valid.

Amy Orr-Ewing: I think I would want to nuance that phrase. It gets, it gets a lot of things right with, um, more of the idea that we need to listen to what. What are the impetuses that are underpinning this so that we can hear the cry of the culture within it?

And for me, there's a, um, There's a deep intuitive sense of justice which materialism can't account for.

What I mean by that is there's, unlike post modernism which, or relativism, which might tell us, you know, nothing is really right or wrong, there are no absolute categories, we just operate in this sphere of personal preference.

Cancel culture is is upholding the idea that injustice is really wrong and it really matters and I, I think there's something right about that. There's a right instinct there and materialism can't account for that. If we're just here, you know, by chance, random slime on the face of the planet with just a collection of atoms, the sum of our biochemistry and there's no transcendent source to life. Actually, that sense of injustice really mattering in an absolute sense isn't warranted. Materialism can't account for it, but I think the Christian faith can.

John Dickson: Yeah, I mean, it's interesting. People who are, you know, canceling others, um, they believe in absolute truth.

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Yeah. They, they're not canceling people thinking you've breached our particular preference in this moment, or anything, they think it's something objective

Amy Orr-Ewing: Exactly. So cancel culture is saying transgression transgression against someone who's experienced injustice in some way or causing harm matters. And it matters so much that you need to die.

John Dickson: Hmm.

Amy Orr-Ewing: Or someone must die, you must die a kind of social death or, or some kind of other death and a penalty needs to be paid.

And um, I think there's an echo of the Christian story. I don't think it's right in the way it's being, the, the iteration of it that we see in culture today. But I think there's an echo of the Christian story that transgression matters, that wrongdoing is absolute. And actually, even that idea that someone needs to die for transgression. There's an echo of the Christian story there.

John Dickson: story, uh. Um, some of my listeners will be feeling a kind of irony that, you know, a Christian is talking about cancel culture and maybe is about to critique cancel culture, when Christians have been, you know, they're sometimes perceived as the great bullies of history.

Absolutely. Who've done most of the cancelling? What do you say to that?

Amy Orr-Ewing: I'd say I completely agree with that.

Reading

The Southern Baptist Convention called for a boycott of the Walt Disney Company today to protest that the creators of Mickey Mouse and an animated Snow White have gone astray, profiting from a liberated Ellen and offering health benefits to employees' homosexual partners.

Reinforcing an initially proposed boycott of only the company's theme parks and stores, the 12,000 delegates here voted to shun the entire Disney empire, including movie studios, cable television channels, book publishers, trade magazines, newspapers, television and radio stations and the ABC network.

...

Southern Baptist leaders at their annual convention pointed to their numbers, with their 15.7 million members forming the nation's largest Protestant denomination. They said they had focused on Disney because it had moved away from the wholesome entertainment it once, under its founder, provided.

John Dickson (studio)

That's Director Mark reading from a 1997 *New York Times* article about Christians in the United States protesting Disney. The boycott lasted 8 years, though financial analysts have said it had little to no discernible effect on the company's earnings overall.

It may not have been effective, but it's an example of the Christian tendency to try to 'cancel' stuff they don't like - whether that's Disney or Harry Potter!

Christians led major efforts to get rid of Harry Potter books from schools in America around the same time as the Disney boycott, arguing that witchcraft and wizardry had no place in the minds of our young people.

Twenty years ago, it was conservative Christians leading the charge to 'cancel' JK Rowling. As American Christian commentator Russell Moore put it, "These days Rowling is still denounced as a devilish influence, but usually from the Left rather than the Right."

Amy Orr-Ewing: And in a way, you know, even to talk about it here in Britain, you know, you might say the greatest proponent of cancel culture was a

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woman called Mary Whitehouse, who was always campaigning to get, you know, films with blasphemy off the airwaves.

And, you know, a kind of puritanical desire to uphold Christian morality in, in culture. And you would look at it in America, you can, you can see it in the States, the church.

John Dickson: But nowhere in Australia, you

Amy Orr-Ewing: not in Australia. Exactly. I'm sure it never happens. Um, so of course there's an irony and I, I absolutely. um, wholeheartedly agree that the church has been as guilty of this as, as anyone else.

But I think what I'm interested in is where this is coming from and, and what it's pointing towards. And for me, I think we're at a profound moment in Western culture where this impetus to say that injustice matters is pointing towards God, not away from him. It's pointing towards the idea of a transcendent source for life, life having real dignity and beauty and meaning, and within the Christian faith we call that the image of God.

And you know, whether a person believes in God or not, if the image of God were actually true and real. We would have some way of knowing it, perceiving it, intuiting it, and of course the writer of the Ecclesiastes says, God has set eternity in the hearts of people. Um, and I just wonder whether this cry of the culture that injustice matters so much, that people need to be cancelled when harm is done, is, is pointing to something deeply true about what it means to be human.

John Dickson: Yes, and as a result, you feel, don't you, that um, Christianity has some deep resources

Amy Orr-Ewing: Yeah.

John Dickson: for the cancel culture. So can you start talking me through? Yeah, so

Amy Orr-Ewing: just I mean beginning there with that idea of transgression mattering, I think there's a real crossover with a Christian idea of what sin is that That you know moral categories actually exist in a real in a real way But what cancel culture can't offer And notably doesn't offer is any possibility of redemption.

So one of the, the tragic and horrific things for people, young people growing up in a culture where there's a fear of crossing a line, you don't know where the lines are, everything's moving, there's all this anxiety about being on the wrong side of history. There's also this sense that redemption is impossible.

There's no, there are no models of forgiveness.

John Dickson (studio)

What Amy says reminds of something we explored way back in episode 39 with Wilfred (Bill) McClay from the Uni of Oklahoma. It was all about 'guilt' - I'm not sure how popular that one was, but I loved it.

He wrote one of the most insightful things I've read in years.

It's an essay titled "The Strange Persistence of Guilt" – a history of the idea of guilt.

He runs through how various philosophers and psychologists (19th and 20th centuries) tried to sideline guilt and shame—and yet it persists.

So, great philosopher/atheist Fredrich Nietzsche attacked the concept of objective guilt.

There's no God, he said, so there's no higher moral authority, and so no real, objective guilt.

A generation later the founder of modern psychology Sigmund Freud tackled the problem of subjective guilt, those lurking feelings that we are accountable to Someone or Something.

Freud was also an atheist, so he didn't think those feelings were rational.

But he did think they were omnipresent.

He reckoned many of our psychological anxieties were sneaky manifestations of guilt.

And psychology could mend feelings of guilt.

The most interesting part of McClay's analysis is that he reckons, with the demise of Christianity, our culture has struggled to find the language and tools to cope with the "strange persistence of guilt".

He identifies three secular coping strategies:

1. An obsession with therapeutic measures—we try assuage guilt through counselling and self-improvement books and courses.
2. A growing severity in mob shaming—we cope with our own guilt by ferociously projecting worse guilt onto “worse sinners”!
3. A desire to identify with, or as, victims—we see victims as the only innocent people.

So, if we see ourselves as victims, or at least the allies of victims, we must be the ‘righteous’.

McClay doesn't offer a Christian solution; He just argues that the trajectory of all this is unhealthy.

Amy Orr - Ewing: So I feel the Christian faith has something really powerful to say in this cultural moment that yes, injustice matters, yes, transgression really matters, but God actually entered human history in Jesus and met us

in our transgression and the death of God in history, et cetera, with Christ on the cross. And so when we begin to introduce the idea of redemption and forgiveness, forgiveness isn't what the crusaders of cancel culture believe it is, a moral weakness. Christian forgiveness isn't saying that the hurt or the harm didn't really matter or it wasn't really that serious. And I think often as the church, we make a mistake by presenting forgiveness as being that ...

John Dickson: get Yeah, as if God is just, you know, sometimes has these benevolent, happy moments where he lets everyone off the hook.

Amy Orr-Ewing: off. Yeah, exactly. And the injustice or the transgression in some ways undermine the seriousness of harm, is undermined by forgiveness. Uniquely in the Christian faith, you have both the profound harm of injustice upheld, because to forgive it requires the death of the Son of God in history.

And in the Christian faith, you have the possibility of redemption because of Jesus in history, because of what he's done through the cross, paying the penalty of sin, dying by crucifixion, this public act of redemption undergirding, yes, the seriousness of harm, but then offering this possibility of forgiveness and redemption.

I think that's so powerful because the reality is whoever we are at this point in history, and I'm, I'm, you know, without a doubt, whoever's listening to this, we are going to be people who've experienced harm. We'll be people listening to this who've experienced abuse and suffering of all kinds, injustice of all kinds, prejudice, all of that.

And so we'll have been on the receiving end of harm. But if we're honest, you know, we just need to look at the planet, look at our families, look at our communities. We're also perpetrators of harm and if there's no hope of redemption, no hope of forgiveness for us, you know, what, what is life? The Christian faith says harm matters.

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So much that God came and demonstrated his love through the cross, but we can be forgiven. We can experience redemption without undermining the dignity of the person who has suffered great injustice.