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## The alleged synagogue shooter was a churchgoer who talked Christian theology, raising tough questions for evangelical pastors



John Earnest, accused in the fatal shooting at the Chabad of Poway synagogue, stands in court during an arraignment hearing in San Diego on Tuesday. (Pool/Reuters)

By Julie Zauzmer | May 1, 2019

Before he allegedly walked into a synagogue in Poway, Calif., and opened fire, John Earnest appears to have written a seven-page letter spelling out his core beliefs: that Jewish people, guilty in his view of faults ranging from killing Jesus to controlling the media, deserved to die. That his intention to kill Jews would glorify God.

Days later, the Rev. Mika Edmondson read those words and was stunned. “It certainly calls for a good amount of soul-searching,” said Edmondson, a pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a small evangelical denomination founded to counter liberalism in mainline Presbyterianism. Earnest, 19, was a member of an OPC congregation. His father was an elder. He attended regularly. And in the manifesto, the writer spewed not only invective against Jews and racial minorities but also cogent Christian theology.

So the pastor read those seven pages, trying to understand. “We can’t pretend as though we didn’t have some responsibility for him — he was radicalized into white nationalism from within the very midst of our church,” Edmondson said.



Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein was injured in the Passover shooting at the Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, Calif., on April 27. (Reuters)

Earnest’s actions on Saturday in Poway — where he allegedly killed one Jewish worshiper and injured a rabbi, a child and another synagogue-goer — have spurred debate among evangelical pastors about the role of a certain stream of Christian theology in shaping the young man’s worldview, which allegedly turned deadly on the last day of the Passover holiday.

Christian leaders across denominations condemned the attack, saying violence against others and white supremacy are completely antithetical to Christian beliefs. “Anti-Semitism and racist hatred which apparently motivated the shooter . . . have no place within our system of doctrine,” the OPC denomination said in a [statement](#).

But while some said Earnest’s background in the church has nothing to do with his alleged crime, and the church shouldn’t have to answer for him, others called for a moment of reckoning.

Some drew comparisons to Muslim communities asked to account for terrorist actions and worried that they could be in the same position when the shooter claims to be a faithful Christian.

“When there’s an act of ‘radical Islamic terror’ — somebody claiming they’re motivated by their Islamic faith — if we’re going to call upon moderates in Muslim communities to condemn those things, we should do the same. I wholeheartedly, full stop, condemn white nationalism,” said Chad Woolf, an evangelical pastor in Fort Myers, Fla., who was one of the first to join in heated debate online about how the attack reflects on evangelicalism. “We should recognize that somebody could grow up in an evangelical church, whose father was a leader, and could somehow conflate the teachings of Christianity and white nationalism. We should be very concerned about that.”



Oscar Stewart says he pursued the gunman who killed one person and wounded three more in a synagogue near San Diego on April 27.(AP)

At the church where Earnest belongs, Escondido Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the San Diego suburbs, members expressed shock and horror at the action allegedly committed by one of their own. The pastor [hosted a discussion](#) the day after the attack, after the Sunday service, and vowed to see how he could support the grieving synagogue nearby. Earnest’s family, which includes five siblings, published a statement saying their son’s beliefs do not match their faith and horrified them; in the manifesto, the writer said that he did not learn his white supremacist beliefs from his family.

*[Parents say synagogue suspect is part of 'the history of evil that has been perpetrated on Jewish people for centuries']*

The manifesto, which circulated online after the attack and before numerous mainstream social media websites attempted to remove it, reeled off grievances against

Jewish people, many of which had little to do with religion. But the writer also spoke of biblical justification and of Christian belief throughout the document. The two main themes were: Jews' guilt in the biblical narrative and his own salvation.

Several pastors said they found the manifesto's parts about salvation significantly more troubling. Because when it came to what it said about salvation, they agreed with it. "I did not choose to be a Christian. The Father chose me. The Son saved me. And the Spirit keeps me," the writer said, espousing a Reformed, or Calvinist, theology. He also wrote that his salvation was based not on his actions or lack of sin but on God's will.

In the manifesto, "you actually hear a frighteningly clear articulation of Christian theology in certain sentences and paragraphs. He has, in some ways, been well taught in the church," said the Rev. Duke Kwon, a Washington pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America, another evangelical denomination which shares many of its beliefs with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

*[Lori Kaye, who died in Poway, was 'a woman of valor']*

Kwon said he does not think most people should read the manifesto, which calls for its readers to also go out and attack Jews and tries to convince them they can do so without getting caught. But he found the letter darkly instructive for pastors. He tweeted snippets of it, and before Twitter removed those tweets, they prompted intense debate among evangelicals. Some castigated Kwon for casting blame on the church in any way. Some argued Earnest must be mentally ill; many sought to make clear that anti-Semitism is incompatible with biblical belief.

Kwon disagreed. He pointed to the evidence that the writer shares the Reformed theology of evangelical Presbyterians: that only God can offer salvation to those he preselects. "Obviously something went wrong. I think it's important for Christians, both those in the pews as well as those in the pulpit, to take a moment for some self-reflection and to ask hard questions," Kwon said.

Kwon said he already exercises caution when he gets to some of the very same verses of the New Testament that are quoted, verses that have long been popular among anti-Semites because they seem to cast blame on the Jewish people for the death of Jesus.

"For any of us who are preaching who are aware of the history of how these passages have been misused . . . there's a learned sensitivity that you apply to the way you teach these passages," Kwon said.

He said the shooting should lead other pastors to be more aware that they need to explain to their congregations what the Bible means when it says Jews killed Jesus. To Kwon, it means some specific Jews alive 2,000 years ago were involved, alongside Roman officials, in Jesus' death — not that Jewish people today bear any guilt for the crucifixion.

But that nuance often gets lost, Kwon said. "There's a deep and ugly history of anti-Semitism that's crept into the Christian church, that needs to be continuously addressed, condemned and corrected," he said.

*[Grieving the Pittsburgh shooting, she tried to use Passover to fight anti-Semitism]*

Woolf said he says “religious leaders,” not “Jews,” when he reads those passages out loud in his church. “Saying ‘the Jews’ without any distinction, to me, has too much anti-Semitic baggage,” he said.

Evangelical leaders often point to the strong support of Israel by conservative Christians in the United States as evidence that evangelicals today embrace Jews. That support of Israel is based in part on Christian theology that claims Jewish people must be in their homeland of Israel to bring about the eventual second coming of Jesus.

But the branch of Christianity that Earnest comes from does not share that belief, Messiah College historian John Fea pointed out. In Reformed denominations, including Earnest’s Presbyterian tradition, “replacement theology” teaches that the Christian church has replaced the Jewish people in God’s biblical promises to Israel.

“This guy is operating in this very strict Reformed theology,” Fea, who studies evangelicalism, said of Earnest. “In replacement theology, all the promises to Israel in the Old Testament now apply to the church, so there’s no particular end-times reason to not be anti-Semitic. The Jews are no longer God’s chosen people. . . . If you believe in this replacement theology, that’s not an incentive to go kill Jews, but it does mean Jews are not as important anymore in God’s plan.”

OPC [pastors’ positions on Israel](#) tend to differ sharply from other evangelicals: “The political/geographical entity known as Israel is not significant in and of itself,” one explanation on the OPC website reads. “We pray for the blood descendants of Abraham, the Jews, that they might also believe in Jesus.”

*[‘We were never taught’: Young Jews encounter anti-Semitism first-hand]*

Edmondson said he recognized another phrase in the letter, one that has been leveled at him when he has sought to address racial justice issues from within the church: “cultural Marxism.”

Edmondson said he is the only African American pastor in the entire OPC denomination, which has more than 300 churches. In the United States, 81 percent of evangelical Presbyterians (including OPC and PCA believers) are white, according to the Pew Research Center.

When he read the writer’s use of the term “cultural Marxism” to criticize liberalism, he recognized the attack. “That’s a term some Reformed and Calvinist people use to resist calls for racial justice. He does use that term. I myself have been called that many times, by other Calvinist people,” he said. “This particular term is used to question a person’s orthodoxy, because orthodoxy, within our circles, is a huge institutional currency. . . . They’re suggesting that what’s really driving you is not the orthodox biblical faith.”

Woolf said resistance to discussing current-day justice issues is common in some evangelical churches, where pastors say they are only there to preach the Bible. “In that stream, you could attend a church where maybe 80 to 90 percent of the people there are also white, and you could not really be forced to be uncomfortable if you had [anti-

Semitic] biases,” he said. “By not addressing these things from the pulpit, whether you mean to or not, you give cover for some of these ideas.”

That’s why Kwon said some parts of the manifesto made him so uncomfortable. It wasn’t the white supremacist ideology taken from online chat rooms, totally foreign to the church, that chilled him most. It was the familiar theology, the parts where the writer showed he did believe what he’d been hearing in the pews as well as what he’d been hearing online.

“It’s possible to teach people in the church about personal individual salvation in Jesus Christ and still fail to instruct them regarding the ethical implications of that faith,” he said. Going forward, Kwon called for “a vision of the gospel that includes implications for the love of neighbor and those that are different from ourselves, to teach it as an essential feature of the gospel of grace and not just an add-on or an appendage to more important matters.”

This Sunday, hearing that clarion call, he will be one of many pastors who try anew to preach that message and hope that this time they are heard.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/01/alleged-synagogue-shooter-was-churchgoer-who-articulated-christian-theology-prompting-tough-questions-evangelical-pastors/?utm\\_term=.9c3965bd4457](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/01/alleged-synagogue-shooter-was-churchgoer-who-articulated-christian-theology-prompting-tough-questions-evangelical-pastors/?utm_term=.9c3965bd4457)