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Christmas on Orchard Road in Singapore: Celebrating the Gift of Jesus Christ between Gucci and Tiffany

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Introduction

I board the Singapore Airlines aircraft at Frankfurt Airport, Germany, in December 2014, and enter a cabin decorated with Christmas bouquets featuring evergreens, red poinsettias, and golden bows. While "Joy to the World" softly plays from the cabin speakers, my fellow passengers on the flight to Singapore take their seats. A German couple entering the cabin regards the Christmas-themed surroundings with bewilderment: "Christmas decorations? But why? Aren't we flying to Asia?" the woman asks her companion. Her astonished question points to popular perceptions of Christmas as a holiday primarily associated with the northern regions of the Western Hemisphere and their Christian history; many are unaware that Christmas celebrations experienced a first wave of globalization in the wake of Christian missionary movements and a second wave in the wake of globalized consumer capitalism and event cultures.[1] Over recent decades, the tradition of German Christmas markets has been exported to various places around the world, including Singapore,[2] and China has become one of the main producers and exporters of Christmas decorations to the United States and Europe.[3] Today, the decorations that create much of the atmosphere of our Christmas are "Made in China," and the chances are good that the seasonal ornaments adorning the cabin walls of the Singapore Airlines aircraft stem from the same source. The notions of *Christmas* and *Asia* are not as oxymoronic as the German traveller's remarks suggest.

Maybe my fellow countryfolk are simply trying to escape the Christmas craze and the cold weather at home. In that case, the tropical city-state in Southeast Asia might not turn out to be the wisest choice of travel destination, because Singaporeans love Christmas. In 2011, Singapore's "Christmas on A Great Street" at Orchard Road, the city-state's premier shopping avenue, was ranked third on *Lonely Planet*'s "Top 10 Christmas Markets of the World," the only Asian market on the list. Every year, "Christmas on A Great Street" attracts several million people.[4] In 2014, ten Christmas Markets offering shopping, food, and entertainment could be found around the island.[5] Throughout Singapore, Christmas is inescapable. Even the local supermarket at my usual living place in Tanah Merah on the eastern end of the island, far away from the buzzing downtown area and Singapore's tourist attractions, plays Christmas carols around the clock and features seasonal decorations starting early in November, suggesting that Christmas is not only enacted for the sake of the tourist business but rather is also entrenched in the Singaporean festive calendar.

Christmas celebrations came to Singapore with missionaries and colonial administrators.[6] In post-colonial times, Christians in Singapore celebrated Christmas mostly as part of their religious calendar, albeit not as a big public celebration. Christmas trees and decorations meant to attract Christmas shoppers were to be found in Singapore's big department stores and the little shops in Chinatown as early as the 1930s.[7] It was in the 1970s, however, that things in Singapore really began to change, as they did in other Asian countries in the post–World War II decades when Christmas was popularized by American TV and movie productions.[8] A Christmas wreath on the door indicated that the house's occupants celebrated Christmas, and contemporary pieces in Singapore's national newspaper advised readers on the latest decoration trends for Christmas wreaths and informed them about the meaning of the religious as well as the popular iconic elements of Christmas, such as the Christmas tree, Father Christmas, gingerbread, and reindeer.[9]

Since 1984, the annual Christmas Light-Up on Orchard Road in the middle of November has officially opened the festive end-of-year season with elaborate lights and decorations in the heart of Singapore's retail district. In its first two decades, the event was organized by the Singapore Tourism Board but has been taken over in recent years by the Orchard Road Business Association (ORBA). Both non-religious organizations emphasize the secular and commercial character of the Christmas Light-Up, viewing it as a means to promote the precinct and to create tourism and retail revenue rather than as a way of celebrating a religious holiday. The rising popularity of Christmas events in the 1980s coincided with a significant rise in the number of Evangelical Christians in Singapore's population.[10] The growth of Christianity was perceived as an effect of what many Singaporeans regarded as increasingly aggressive proselytization practices that threatened the social cohesion of Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population.[11] Such concerns also provoked discussions about the nature and role of Christmas in Singapore, in which fears were expressed that the import of Western traditions would happen at the expense of local traditions.[12] Early on, the national newspaper *The Straits Times* published several commentaries and opinion pieces. These pieces either argued that Christmas celebrations in Singapore should have a secular character or emphasized the religious nature of the holiday, situating it among the various religious holidays whose celebration expressed the multicultural and multi-religious nature of Singaporean society.[13] In 2004, a Christian organization called Celebrate Christmas in Singapore (CCIS) was granted permission to enrich the Orchard Road Christmas celebrations with Christian performances in order to reintroduce some of the religious meaning of Christmas into the commercial festivities.

Religious, secular, and economic aspirations intersect in popular public Christmas celebrations such as Orchard Road's "Christmas on A Great Street" and push the festivities back and forth along the axis laid out in the introduction to this volume. This chapter discusses Christmas and its related discourses and practices in the context of Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. As in other places in the world, secular and religious discourses as well as consumer and religious practices intermingle in Singapore's Christmas celebrations; the Singaporean case provides an interesting example of the role of religion in a strictly regulated public sphere. First, I will address the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Singaporean society and its role in public discourse as well as the regulations concerning religion within the city-state. Second, I will sketch some of the history and success of Orchard Road's Christmas celebration in the context of Singapore's tourism business and retail sector. Third, I will discuss how the popularity of public Christmas celebrations allows Singaporean Christians to express their religious convictions within the public sphere, albeit in limited and highly regulated ways.

The Singaporean Context: The State's Commitment to Multiculturalism

After World War II, Singapore became an increasingly self-governed colony of the United Kingdom. In 1963, Singapore entered the Federation of Malaya and thereby became independent from the UK. The merger failed due to the ethnic politics of the Federation and its preferential treatment of Muslim Malays over Singaporean Chinese, as well as economic inequalities between Singapore and Malaya. In 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Federation and became the Republic of Singapore. In contrast to the Muslim-led government of Malaysia with Islam as its official religion, Singapore deliberately employed a secular ideology to keep the political and religious spheres separated.[14]

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has undergone rapid industrialization, modernization, and economic development. Today, it has reached the second highest per-capita income in Asia and has one of the highest population densities in the world.[15] The 2010 census documents the complex ethnic and religious composition of Singaporean society, where 76.1% of residents are Chinese, 15.0% are Malays, and 7.4% are Indians.[16] In Singapore, the practice of religion is closely bound to racial-cultural identities.[17] That the majority of Singapore's residents are Chinese accounts for the high percentage of people practising a religion associated with Chinese heritage, such as Buddhism (33.3%) or Daoism (10.9%). According to the 2010 census, Christians, at 18.3%, are the second-largest religious group, followed by Muslims (14.7%) and Hindus (5.1%).[18] The significant growth of Christianity from 10.6% in 1980 to 18.3% in 2010 is attributed mainly to the success of neo-Pentecostal and independent churches, closely followed by non-Pentecostal evangelical churches, among the urbanized, affluent, English-speaking, university-educated Chinese.[19] The religious heterogeneity of Singapore's citizenship is also visible in the various religious buildings found throughout the island and its diverse public celebrations, such as Vesak (Buddhist), Deepavali (Hindu), Hari Raya Puasa (Muslim), and Christmas (Christian).

Singapore is a secular society with no official state religion. The state grants religious freedom and freedom of worship. The official position towards religion is guided by the state's "commitment to multiculturalism,"[20] which is expressed through the equal treatment of all cultural groups – and thereby all religious groups – regardless of their minority or majority status. The official state policy includes a general endorsement of religious values as the moral backbone of Singaporean society.[21]

At the same time, religious heterogeneity and multiculturalism are seen as possible sources of unrest and conflict and thereby as a threat to racial and religious harmony. According to a statement by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Goh Chok Tong in 1990, "harmony" makes up the very foundation of social cohesion and peace and is considered a necessary condition for Singapore to prosper as a nation: "I consider racial and religious harmony as the most important bedrock of our society. If there is no harmony there will be no peaceful prosperous Singapore. As simple as that. The Prime Minister and his colleagues have spent many years to build up this climate of harmony amongst Singaporeans and nurtured a climate of tolerance amongst people of different religions and I have every intention of ensuring that such a happy state of affairs remains."[22]

Aware that religious harmony cannot be taken for granted, the Singaporean government actively shapes policies to ensure that "moderation and social responsibility prevail in the practice of one's religious faith."[23] The state's policy towards religion in Singapore is characterized by "close scrutiny, interventionist surveillance, and ultra-sensitivity to perceived threats."[24] Therefore, legislation such as the *Internal Security Act* (*ISA*) (Cap. 143), the *Sedition Act* (*SA*)(Cap. 290), and the *Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act* (*MRHA*) (Cap. 167A) prescribes a strict separation of the political and religious spheres, punishes violations of the set boundaries, and attempts to forestall any religious extremism or interreligious tensions and conflicts.[25] Such legislation is used to regulate religious practices and the possibilities for religious expression by individuals and groups in private and in public. For example, the *MRHA* allows the minister to issue restraining orders against any religious spokesperson or member of a religious organization who may have caused or attempts to cause "feelings of enmity, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups."[26] In contrast to punitive instruments such as the *ISA* or *SA*, the *MRHA* has a preventive purpose; it is meant to de-escalate instances of religious disharmony before they can grow into public conflicts. The act does not define what actions count as transgressions under the *MRHA*, leaving it to the minister and the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony to decide which behaviours, actions, or statements are out of bounds.[27] Due to the looseness of the key terms, religious groups are compelled to be extra cautious in their relations with other religious organizations and their comments about any other religious group in order to avoid any possibility of "ill feelings" between them or attributed intentions of ill-will. The work of the Presidential Council and the actions of the minister regarding the application of the *MRHA* are not visible to the public. There are no public reports of the warnings issued by the minister, and the proceedings of the Council are secret.[28] This means that the regulation of religious harmony happens "behind closed doors";[29] the effects of the Act are "actively restrictive and explicitly policing and reinforcing the boundaries between the religions"[30] and ethnic groups.

In order to avoid ethnic-religious tensions and to enhance religious harmony, the state treats all religious groups equally. This equal treatment becomes quite visible in providing sites for religious worship. Due to the high population density and scarcity of space in Singapore, "the state takes a functional approach to religious places" in urban planning and land-use policies.[31] The government's planning standards for sites of religious practice and worship in newly developed town centres correspond to the percentage of Singaporeans belonging to the main religious traditions present in Singapore. For example, Singaporeans of Chinese background adhering to Buddhism or Daoism are the largest religious group, making up 44% of the population. Therefore, for every 9,000 dwelling units, a Chinese temple site will be set aside. Christians are the second-largest religious group, making up 18% of the population. Therefore, for every 12,000 dwelling units in new town centres, a site for a church will be designated.[32]

The general procedure followed to gain permission to use one of these allotted spaces is to tender for it, but religious organizations are only permitted to tender for spaces allocated to their particular religion (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc.). As land is scarce and there are not enough allotted spaces to account for the denominational diversity of Christianity and its growing need for worship spaces, many churches convert existing "secular" spaces for religious purposes. This could include using flats and apartments in housing complexes or renting public, civic, or commercial spaces as temporary meeting grounds. Such spaces could include conference rooms in hotels, theatres, cinemas, or school halls.[33] But the conversion or utilization of existing buildings or secular spaces for religious purposes is also controlled and regulated by the government.[34] Flats in high-rise HDB[35] buildings are restricted to residential use only. Using such flats for religious purposes is strictly speaking a violation of regulations. As for commercial spaces, there exist possibilities to apply for permission to change the designated use of land or existing buildings. Whether a change in usage is approved by the authorities or not depends on several factors, such as the location of the building, the expected impact on traffic in the area, and the existence of adequate parking facilities. In the 1980s, some congregations obtained permission to convert old disused cinemas into churches.[36]

In July 2010, the ongoing practice of renting commercial spaces for religious purposes prompted the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore to issue new mandatory guidelines for the limited and non-exclusive use of commercial spaces for religious activities. In general, religious activities are not allowed in commercial spaces, but the URA permits some exceptions in a very limited way as long as the religious use does "not exceed two days a week" or cause any "disturbances to the public," "such as noise, traffic or parking problems." Moreover, no display of religious signs, advertisements, or posters announcing religious use is allowed on the premises or the exterior of the building.[37] Similarly to the regulation of religious attitudes and expressions by the *MRHA*, the government's planning standards for buildings and policies concerning religious and non-religious spaces simultaneously "serve to segregate and balance the major religions"[38] in the secular state of Singapore.

The state's "doctrine of religious harmony"[39] is deeply intertwined with what in the Singaporean context is called "legislated multiculturalism" or "legislated multi-racialism."[40] Once it was inscribed into Singapore's constitution, multiculturalism (or multiracialism) could serve as an instrument of governance, legitimizing policies and administrative practices with regard to race and religious affiliation.[41] The policies are meant to ensure the equal treatment of all ethnic and religious groups in order to prevent disharmony, conflict, or racial riots. The state's policies include official language policies (there are four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English) as well as housing quotas and designated team structures for candidates in elections, which are designed to ensure the equal distribution of ethnic groups in public housing and public office. Other instruments of governance such as Racial Harmony Day on 21 July or constitutional soft laws such as the *Declaration of Religious Harmony* are meant to encourage positive attitudes toward multiculturalism among Singapore's citizens and to counter the repressive nature of the state's policies in managing religion and race. The declaration, issued in 2003, reads: "We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation. We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect, and understanding. We shall always recognise the secular nature of our State, promote cohesion within our society, respect each other's freedom of religion, grow our common space while respecting our diversity, foster inter-religious communications, and thereby ensure that religion will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore."[42]

In balancing the different religions in Singapore through legislative measures, the state also manages and circumscribes possibilities for public festivities and religious celebrations. Instruments for the management of these possibilities include the official appointment of public holidays that correspond to religious festivals and the appointment of dates and spaces for religious activities in the public sphere.[43] The Christmas celebration on Orchard Road is an event that falls under this scheme of policing religious festivities in the public sphere.

Christmas on *A Great Street*: The Orchard Road Light-Up

Since 1984, Orchard Road, Singapore's premier shopping locale, has been lavishly decorated and illuminated during the Christmas season. Stretching from Tanglin Mall to Plaza Singapura, the illuminated decorations feature a new design and colour scheme every year and extend along 2.88 kilometres of Orchard Road.

The first illuminations were organized by the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board[44] and are now hosted by Community Chest (a charity organization) and the Orchard Road Business Association (ORBA). Various large international sponsors such as Hitachi and Mastercard also finance the event.

Beginning three decades ago, the "Light-Up event" – the date in the middle of November when the Christmas lights are turned on – marks the beginning of the end-of-year celebrations in Singapore. According to the private and public stakeholders who organize the event, the Christmas Light-Up has turned Orchard Road into "a compelling destination with strong local character … delighting locals and tourists of all ages."[45] The elaborate lights and lavish decorations on Orchard Road are accompanied by a range of performances, street art, music, dancers, and carollers to "entertain shoppers as they delight in their festive shopping and bond with their loved ones."

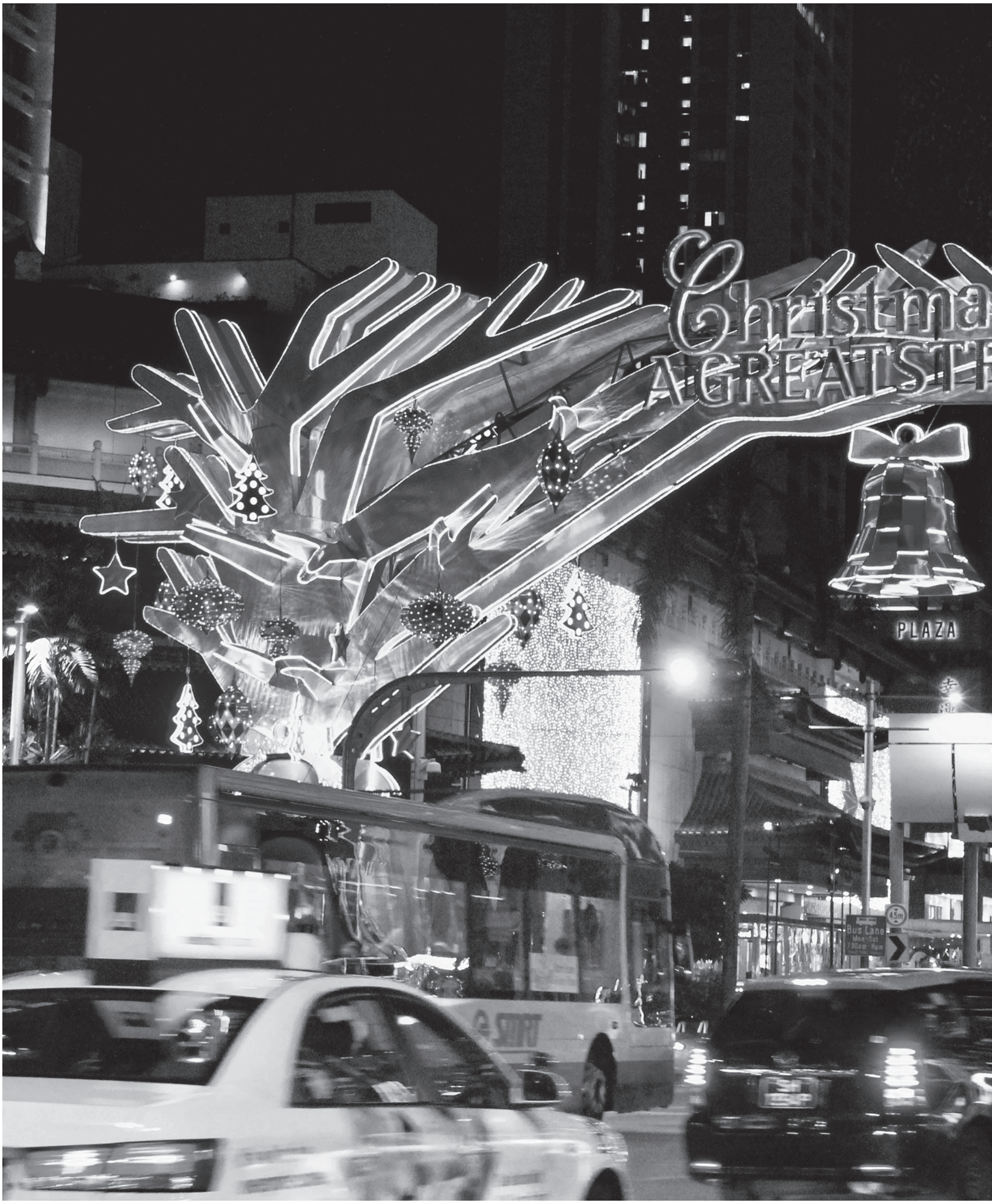

Figure 10.1 Orchard Road Light-Up, 2015.


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In recent years, Christmas on Orchard Road has been the most photographed event in Singapore. Illuminated themed landscapes in front of the ION Orchard mall invite passers-by to take selfies with reindeer, huge candy canes, and lollipops, while in the Ngee Ang City mall a giant Christmas tree featuring hundreds of little presents wrapped in Tiffany's iconic light blue packaging fills the high-ceilinged lobby. A little stage invites shoppers to have their picture taken in front of the Tiffany-themed Christmas tree. Navigating the strolling masses on Orchard Road, it becomes obvious that the selfie stick is a ubiquitous accessory, and many of the seasonal decorations cater directly to this popular picture-taking practice. Christmas on Orchard Road even has its own hashtag for use on social media: "Share your love for Christmas on Orchard Road by simply hash-tagging #orchardrdxmas on your Facebook, Instagram or Twitter post. Celebrate with us and share your joy with loved ones!"[46] By spreading pictures of Orchard Road's Christmas decorations on social media, users are also by default providing advertising for the brands that make up the backdrop of the illuminations on Orchard Road. The chances are good that the trademark lettering of Gucci, Dior, or Tiffany's provides the background for numerous selfies and atmospheric pictures taken on Orchard Road, where all the stores, malls, and buildings compete with each other for the best Christmas decorations and thus for shoppers' attention and international recognition.

The Light-Up on Orchard Road has become known and is actively branded as "Christmas on *A Great Street*."[47] Over the years, the event has gained huge popularity and recognition outside of Singapore. In 2010, it attracted seven million people.[48] In the eyes of Singaporean business associations and the Tourism Board, this counts as a huge success and tallies with the nation's ambitions to be a global city as well as a tourism and financial services hub.[49]

In addition to economic ambitions, Christmas on Orchard Road has also been incorporated into the national multiculturalism discourse. The 2014 decorations featured large, multicoloured stars hanging like Christmas tree ornaments from the huge trees framing Orchard Road. The Singaporean newspaper *The Straits Times* reported, "Orchard Road Goes Colourful for Christmas to Celebrate Singapore's Diversity."[50] The chairman of the Orchard Road Business Association explained, "the many colors reflect Singapore's diversity as it celebrates 50 years of nationhood next year,"[51] whereby she invoked Singapore's ideal of a multicultural nation-state. The public work of Christmas in the context of the stakeholders of "Christmas on *A Great Street*" affirms a range of Singaporean self-understandings and aspirations, while pushing the seasonal festivities – to invoke the editors' idea of the "coordinates of Christmas"[52] – along the axis towards the end of commercial activities (i.e. materiality), and the state ideology of economic success and an affirmation of Singapore's multiculturalism (i.e. ideology and culture).

"The Reason for the Season": Spreading the Message of Christmas

While the Christmas decorations on Orchard Road might feature angels among other seasonal images, and Christmas carols celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ might be heard everywhere along the street to invoke the "seasonal habitus,"[53] the event is rather devoid of overtly religious content. The one big exception is the department store Tangs, which invokes the spirit of Christmas through prominently displayed, embellished, and illuminated quotations from the Bible.

Built in 1958, Tangs is one of the oldest stores on Orchard Road. It is easily recognizable with its sloped, green-tiled Chinese-style roofs, which provide a stark contrast to the postmodern metal and glass structures of the ION Orchard building. A Christian family of Chinese origin founded Tangs in 1932, and their prominent display of Bible quotations in the storefront during the Christmas season has a long history.[54] In 2013, the verse "Blessed are those who dwell in the house of the Lord" (Psalm 84:4) was framed by a large peacock and brightly glowing flowers. In 2014, a huge golden heart, surrounded by lights and little crosses and adorned with a stylized tree and exotic birds, displayed John 15:12, "Love each other as I have loved you." The chosen quote for the 2015 Christmas season was John 8:12, "The Lord is the light of the world," displayed with large luminescent letters and accompanied by star clusters in white, gold, and red.

Tangs's practice of illuminating Bible quotations as a part of their Christmas decorations is older than the aforementioned regulation introduced in 2010, which prohibits religious signs on non-religious buildings, such as department stores. It also seems that public displays of Bible verses are much more acceptable in the context of Christmas, which is officially recognized as a Christian holiday, although, as the following example shows, many voices lament the loss of its religious content in the process of commercialization.

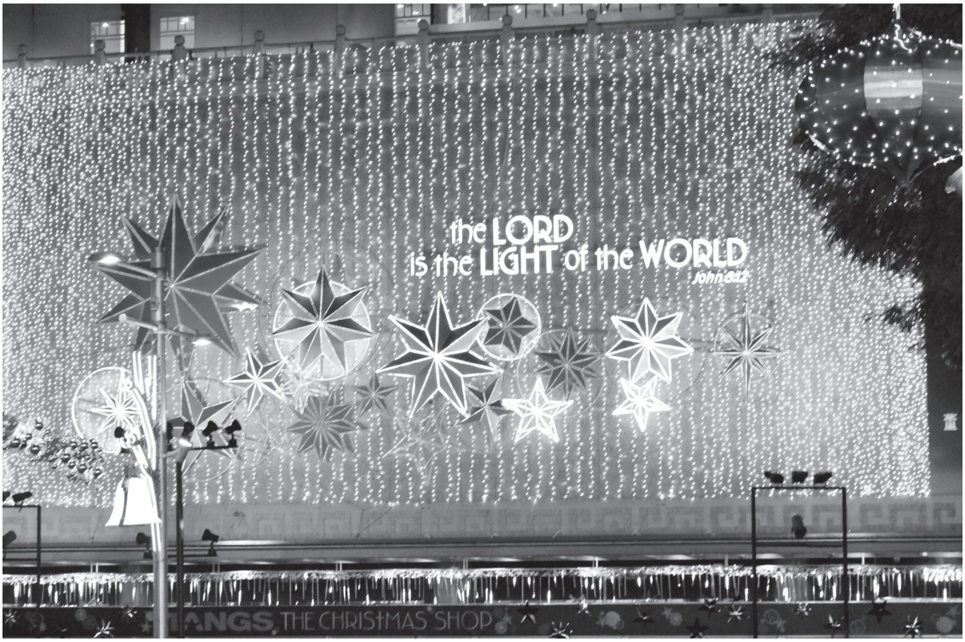

Figure 10.2 Christmas decorations at Tangs department store, December 2015.

In 2004, a group of Christians joined forces to "bring the message of peace and joy of Christmas back into an otherwise commercial festive occasion" because they were concerned "that many may have lost the true meaning of Christmas."[55] They named their organization Celebrate Christmas in Singapore (CCIS), and it is supported by various denominational bodies, churches, and para-church organizations in Singapore. According to information from CCIS, the "annual event at Orchard Road became a hallmark of the Christian community in Singapore in reaching out and blessing the community with the message of love. Together with participants from other parts of the world, CCIS is celebrated to commemorate the Gift of Jesus Christ during the first Christmas, through a multimedia celebration of performances, interactive activities, carols, floats, mass choirs, and much more!"[56]

A week before Christmas, there is a flurry of activity on Orchard Road as preparations for seasonal entertainment, including activity tents and performances by various Christian groups, Christian choirs, and dance troupes, are made. These performances and activities are meant to reach out and bless the community, share the meaning of Christmas through

Figure 10.3 Photo wall inviting passers-by to pose with characters from the Christmas story, December 2014.

creative storytelling, and thereby inform shoppers about the "the reason for the season."[57] Although the stated aim of CCIS is to inform shoppers and tourists on Orchard Road about the Christian story that underlies the history and meaning of Christmas celebrations, it is not regarded as an opportunity to evangelize among the public: "This is by no means an evangelical call. All around the world, people take part in the festivities in some way. We hope everyone in Singapore can learn why Christmas is celebrated."[58]

As the organizers are aware of the boundaries clearly marked by the state for public declarations of religious beliefs and Christians' difficult position when it comes to evangelizing in the public sphere, the program usually includes something called "creative storytelling." In 2014, volunteers from CCIS dressed as Romans and the Three Wise Men posed in front of photo walls telling the Christmas story and invited passers-by to enact the Nativity scene and to take pictures or selfies.

Both the consumer-oriented secular celebration on Orchard Road and the Christian event encourage the popular activity of taking pictures. In 2006, CCIS hosted the "Night Photo Contest" themed "Capture the Spirit

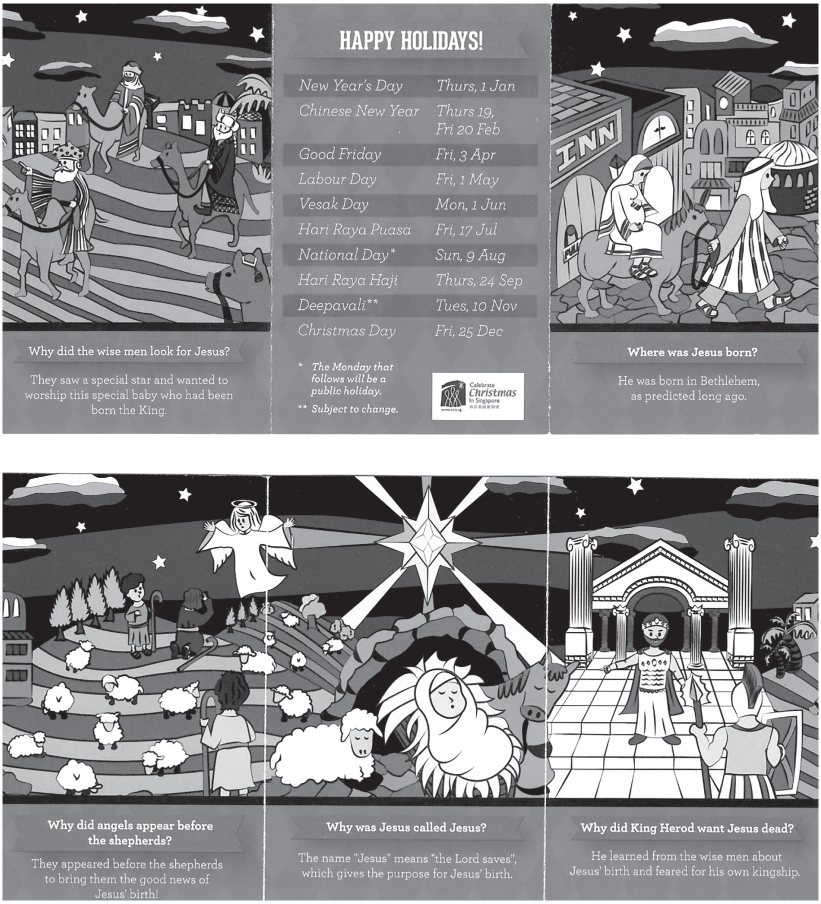

Figure 10.4 CCIS leaflet handed to passers-by, December 2014.

of Christmas in Singapore," which was supported by NIKON Singapore and jointly organized by The Photographic Society Singapore.[59]

Another activity in 2014 that invited pedestrians to briefly interrupt their stroll through the tropical shopping street was a large colouring tapestry with scenes from the Christmas story and the Nativity. Young Christians handed out coloured felt pens, inviting passers-by to colour the tapestry. While they were colouring, the volunteers explained the story of Jesus Christ and handed out small, credit card–sized flyers showing a miniature of the tapestry; the flyers briefly explained a version of the Christmas story in pictures and short sentences.

The back of the flyer presented a short list of all of the religious holidays in Singapore; this list is a small detail, but it clearly illustrates one of the many ways in which Singaporeans enact the official commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, even while displaying their religious particularities.

The main attractions during the days leading up to Christmas Eve are usually two stages for performances. In 2014, most of the performances were dance, choir, carol singing, or other musical performances, all of which mainly focused on interpreting popular Christmas carols. Neither the moderator who spoke in between performances nor the performers themselves framed the performances in overtly Christian terms. Performing the songs is regarded as a way to spread the message of Christmas, and no further comment on or explanation of the content of the carols seems to be needed. On the one hand, the absence of such elaborations can be interpreted as an effect of the strict regulation of religious propagation in public spaces, which leaves religious actors without clear ideas of what is appropriate and what already counts as a transgression. On the other hand, the program is clearly meant as entertainment for passers-by, who might not commit to staying for the full duration of a performance, much less for the whole evening program. A program that basically contains the singing of different songs and drum and dance performances set to Christmas carols invites passers-by to stop and experience a short moment of delightful diversion.

In addition to the performances during the days leading up to Christmas, CCIS hosts the big celebration on Orchard Road on Christmas Day, when parts of the street are closed for traffic to allow visitors to enjoy the mass carolling concert and celebrate Christmas. The program includes not only performances and activities created by local Christian churches and organizations representing different denominations, but also Christian performers from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, the United States, and Brazil. Over the course of more than ten years, the annual Christmas event has become "a hallmark of the Christian community in Singapore," commemorating the "Gift of Jesus Christ"[60] in a public space mainly through the performance of Christmas carols without further elaboration on their content and its meaning. Reading materials occasionally offered to the interested audience are accompanied by warning signs declaring that the material contains the Christian message.

Figure 10.5 Christian reading material printed with the disclaimer that it contains the Christian message, December 2014.

In 2014, a musical dance-cum-storytelling performance by the group Singapore Youth for Christ (SYFC) provided a contrast to the brief windows of diversion and entertainment provided by the CCIS program. The SYFC performance lasted twenty minutes, contained a narrative arc, and demanded the investment of time by the audience. The story took the form of a Christian testimony performed on stage, which further heightened its contrast to the other performances.

Inviting pedestrians to stop and watch the upcoming performance, a young woman from Singapore Youth for Christ explained that they were "here to spread a little bit of Christmas cheer. If you are wondering what is the true love, joy, and peace of Christmas, we hope that our little performance will shed a little light on that."[61] The play told the story of a young family (a father, a mother, and their teenage daughter) caught up in their busy everyday lives: the father works in an office, the mother is a housewife who does the daily chores of cleaning, cooking, etc., and the daughter attends school and studies for her exams. All three miss the festive feeling Christmas promises and dream of escaping from their dreaded everyday lives in ways that are portrayed as rather superficial: the father dreams of holidays at the beach, the mother dreams of expensive shopping tours, and the daughter dreams of hanging out with her friends. While they are all sitting around the dinner table, a stranger knocks at their door. The stranger wants to spread the joy of Christmas by singing a song. They invite the girl into their apartment.

The guest introduces the song she is about to perform, which is titled "Christmas Isn't Christmas Anymore." Before she starts to sing, she explains that it is a song about the "true love, joy, and peace of Christmas," which she wants to sing because many people have the wrong idea when it comes to Christmas. They want to take a vacation; they want to find joy in mundane life; they want to share love through presents. She tells her audience – the family on stage as well as the larger audience of the performance standing in front of the stage – that the "true love, joy, and peace of Christmas" are "summed up in the person Jesus Christ – the *Christ* of *Christ*mas." She continues by saying that "through Jesus Christ, God offers love … because he gave his precious son to save us." Explaining that Jesus was "punished at the cross for our sins … to become our saviour," she connects her words to the famous carol "O Holy Night" and the line "It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!" She addresses the topic of peace next, referring to the popular Christmas phrase "Peace on earth and goodwill to men." Our peace, she explains, comes from Jesus's death on the cross and "our relationship to God through Jesus Christ." Finally, she addresses the third element – joy. Here, the message is that God raised Jesus from the dead, that Jesus is alive, which is a reason to rejoice and the reason why the famous Christmas carol goes "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King." This is the moment when the story takes the form of a testimony: "Our Saviour is in control. And knowing that allows me to live with true unchanging joy no matter what the circumstances of life." She finishes her explanations with the statement that "Christmas ain't Christmas if we don't realize that it is all about God's gift to us, Jesus Christ. And if you know him, everlasting love, joy, and peace can be yours this season and beyond." Then she performs the song, which delivers the message that Jesus Christ is "God's gift to you and me." After the performance, the group gave little presents to the audience that contained the lyrics of the song.

The Singapore Youth for Christ (SYFC) performance is remarkable in two ways. Not only was it a performance that presented a single cohesive narrative, it was also the most explicit in terms of its religious message. The deliverance of this message is in accordance with the mission statement of the organization of CCIS, which aims to educate visitors about the meaning of Christmas. But compared to the other performances, it was the only one making the Christian message as explicit as it could get, almost leaving the bounds of education and venturing into the realm of proselytism. The SYFC performance was not simply a story of Christmas featuring Mary and Joseph, the baby in the manger, and the three magi. It was a story that placed emphasis on the message of salvation that is contained in the Christmas story. Whereas popular statements refer to Christmas in broad and universal terms as "the season of joy and celebration" when everyone wishes for "peace on earth and goodwill to men," the narrative developed on stage clearly linked these well-meant wishes to a religious message, one that only unfolds its "true" meaning and transformative power when "God's gift to us" is acknowledged. The performance contains the unspoken message that the popular celebrations and festivities on Orchard Road and elsewhere are not "Christmas" in the strictest sense: "Christmas ain't Christmas anymore when the love of God isn't told." Thereby, it clearly posits Christmas at the other ends of the various axes that form the "coordinates of Christmas": emphasizing the Christian roots, the religious nature, and the "true meaning" of Christmas in the commercial and touristic context of Orchard Road, CCIS and more specifically SYFC are pushing the Christian holiday towards the "religious," "spiritual," and "authentic" ends of the axes.

Conclusion

In the Christmas celebrations on Orchard Road, consumption, entertainment, state policies, and religion intersect in many ways. Singapore's official commitment to multiculturalism and its regulation of religion clearly circumscribe public expressions of religious sentiments and convictions. Although there are possibilities for each of the major religions present in Singapore to celebrate their most important holidays with public events, these events do not include activities that could be read as active proselytizing or evangelizing. Many of the public religious celebrations are at once a celebration of a particular religious holiday

Figure 10.6 LED screen during the Youth for Singapore Performance, December 2014.

and a festive acknowledgment of Singapore as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation.[62] The Christmas celebrations on Orchard Road reference these discourses in various ways, for example by interpreting the choice of colours for the decorations as acknowledgment of Singapore's diversity and by printing a list of all religious holidays on the back of the little leaflet about the story of Christmas.

In Singapore, particular religious affiliations such as Buddhist/Daoist, Muslim, or Hindu are associated with ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay, and Indian, respectively). The only religion that runs across ethnic lines is Christianity, which, in addition, is not seen as a "proper" Asian religion, but as a Western import.[63] One way for Christians to conform to the discourse of multiculturalism is to perform what could be called *inherent multiculturalism* instead of representing one clearly distinguishable ethnic/cultural group that contributes to Singapore's multiracialism. The performance of inherent multiculturalism was mirrored in the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Christian artists on stage at the 2014 celebration, who came from Singapore, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, the United States, and many other places. Such portrayals of inherent diversity help to promote Christianity as a universal and thereby multi-ethnic religion that fits into a society that praises diversity – this despite the perception of Christianity as a foreign religion that has to recruit its members at the expense of local traditions and thereby endangers religious harmony. Due to this perception, Christians' activities in the public sphere are watched with scrutiny. The decision to allow Christian organizations to metaphorically and literally take centre stage on Orchard Road during the end-of-year celebrations is considerably influenced by the economic and touristic advantages that the season promises Singapore's retail and tourism sectors. The double-sided nature of Christmas as a secular, globalized, consumer-oriented holiday and a religious holiday with a distinctly religious message allows it to both create touristic and economic possibilities and offer legitimation for the presentation of a religious message in the public sphere. The ambivalent nature of Christmas creates a certain grey area where performances and creative storytelling might be able to open up spaces for evangelizing practices that do not require a warning sign that says "Contains Christian message." Therefore, it might not be a surprise that the little flyer telling the story of the birth of Jesus Christ that was handed to shoppers on Orchard Road made a concession to multiculturalism by listing all of the religious holidays celebrated in Singapore on the back.

The Christmas celebrations and decorations are in and of themselves a material witness to diversity and the malleability of this particular holiday, which accommodates secular as well as religious significations, stimulates modern consumer sentiments as well as religious feelings, and incorporates themes, symbols, and structures from various cultural backgrounds. Upon entering Changi Airport on 23 December 2014 to fly home, I am greeted by an almost-familiar scene. The German seasonal greeting "Frohe Festtage" (Happy Holidays) adorns the entrance to Changi Airport's own Christmas paradise featuring a large wooden pyramid (a typical German Christmas decoration traditionally produced in the Erzgebirge) and a small version of Neuschwanstein Castle. I have to think of my fellow German travellers from the beginning of the journey, and I wonder what they thought about Singapore's interpretation of German Christmas traditions.

Notes

1 Moore, *Christmas: The Sacred to Santa*, 167–88.

2 In 2014, the first "Christmas Wonderland" fair at Singapore's Gardens by the Bay featured a European-style Christmas Market with little wooden huts selling wine, sweets, and artisanal products, all surrounded by seasonal light sculptures and entertainment. The month-long event attracted more than 900,000 visitors in its first year and has since become an annual seasonal attraction for Singaporeans and tourists alike. See Kaur, "Gardens by the Bay's Christmas Wonderland to Charge for Admission This Year."

3 Sigley, "A Chinese Christmas Story," 101; Jackson, "Visuality," 52.

4 Singapore Tourism Board, "Placemaking."

5 Said, "Jolly Markets."

6 See for example the report of Christmas festivities at various churches and Christian institutions in 1909: "Christmastide. Seasonable Celebrations in Singapore. Festivities at Local Institutions."

7 "Colony Cavalcade," 2.

8 Moore, *Christmas: The Sacred to Santa*, 177–85.

9 "Eastern Touch for X'mas Wreaths," 23; "Dress Up Your Door for X'mas," 3; "A to Z of Christmas," 2.

10 Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 60.

11 Hill, "Conversion and Subversion," 11; Tey, "Excluding Religion," 122.

12 "PM Calls for Update," 1; "Don't Celebrate Xmas," 14; Villanueva, "Christmas Is Universal," 24.

13 Ooi, "Keeping the Spirit of Christmas," 24; "Make Orchard Road Light-Up Permanent," 14.

14 Sinha, "Theorising 'Talk'"; Chia, "Malaysia and Singapore," 82–7.

15 GDP per capita based on PPP (purchasing power parity) in 2016: #1 Qatar, #2 Luxembourg, #3 Macao SAR, #4 Singapore; see Knoema, "World GDP per Capita."

Population density (people per sq. km. of land area) in 2015: #1 Macao SAR, 19,392.9; #2 Monaco 18,865.5; #3 Singapore 7,828.9; see Knoema, "Population Density."

16 Singapore Department of Statistics, "Population in Brief 2016," 18.

17 Goh, "Christian Identities in Singapore," 4; Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 61–5.

18 Singapore Department of Statistics, "Census of Population 2010," 11.
19 Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 60; Goh, "State and Social Christianity," 54–5.
20 Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions," 344.
21 Tan, "Keeping God in Place," 56.
22 Goh Chok Tong in a parliamentary debate; see Parliamentary Debate on the "Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act," col. 1150.
23 Tan, "Keeping God in Place," 58.
24 Ibid., 59.
25 Thio, "Constitutional 'Soft' Law"; Neo, "Seditious in Singapore!"; Tey, "Excluding Religion"; Winslow, "Legislation Comment and List."
26 The *Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act*, sec. 8 (1) (a).
27 Tey, "Excluding Religion," 133–5.
28 *The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act*, sec. 7.
29 Tey, "Excluding Religion," 120.
30 Goh, "Christian Identities," 5.
31 Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions," 346; Kong, "Ideological Hegemony," 27.
32 Kong, "Ideological Hegemony," 28.
33 Kong, "In Search of Permanent Homes."
34 Goh, "Christian Identities," 6.
35 HDB is the acronym for public housing built and administrated by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the statutory board of Singapore's Ministry of National Development.
36 Kong, "Ideological Hegemony," 28.
37 Urban Redevelopment Authority, "Limited & Non-Exclusive Religious Use."
38 Goh, "Christian Identities," 6.
39 Tey, "Excluding Religion," 121.
40 According to Chua Beng Huat, the term "multi-racialism" is more commonly used in Singapore than "multiculturalism." See Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore," 58. My quotation refers to the use of the term "legislated multiculturalism" in an advertisement for the book *50 Things to Love about Singapore*, printed in *The Straits Times*, December 2014. See Long, ed., *50 Things to Love About Singapore*. In the actual chapter referring to this topic, the term "legislated multi-racialism" is used (Chang, "The State Will Help You Get Along"). Although not an

academic source, the advertisement as well as the chapter in the collection indicate how deeply entrenched the discourse on racial and religious harmony and its connected policies are in public discourse.

41 Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore"; Goh, "The Space of Race."

42 "Declaration of Religious Harmony."

43 Kong, "Religious Processions," 242; Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore," 60.

44 Now shortened to Singapore Tourism Board.

45 Quotations taken from one of the "Christmas on Orchard Road Exhibition" signs, placed at Shaw House Urban Plaza, November–December 2014.

46 Sign placed next to the illuminated "Christmas on A Great Street" sign on the sidewalk of Orchard Road in front of the ION Orchard, December 2014.

47 "Christmas on A Great Street."

48 Reed, "Singapore Becomes Christmas Island."

49 Goh, "Christian Identities," 10.

50 Lin, "Orchard Road Goes Colourful."

51 Ibid.

52 See the introduction to this volume.

53 See the contribution by Pamela Klassen in this volume.

54 "About Tangs." See Ooi, "Keeping the Spirit of Christmas," 24.

55 Celebrate Christmas in Singapore (CCIS), "About CCIS."

56 Ibid.

57 Celebrate Christmas in Singapore (CCIS), "CCIS Promo."

58 "Don't Rain on My Parade," 2.

59 "Capture the Spirit of Christmas in Singapore Contest," 62.

60 Celebrate Christmas in Singapore (CCIS), "About CCIS."

61 Performance by Singapore Youth for Christ on 20 December 2014 at Orchard Road, Celebrate Christmas in Singapore. All quotes are taken from my field notes.

62 During the celebrations of Vesak Day in Chinatown in 2014, a display informed onlookers about the religious holidays of all of the major religions present in Singapore.

63 Goh, "Rethinking Resurgent Christianity in Singapore," 105; Chia, "Malaysia and Singapore," 82–3; Goh, "Christian Identities," 9–10.

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