

'What are the rosary and nun's habit if not Catholic?': The Chapel Party Controversy in Singapore

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This article analyses the controversy over the advertising of a dance party to be held in the former Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus and contextualises it with similar controversies which occurred concurrently - Taoist robes worn at a fashion parade, and posters put up by the Campus Crusade for Christ. The community and government reading of these events as instances of insensitivity to religious faiths tell us about the power of state ideology, and the conflation of religious and racial harmony; a salient reminder that, in Singapore, modernity is not the same as Westernisation. The cancellation of the Chapel Party demonstrates the privileging in Singapore of religious sensitivities so that religious harmony is understood as racial harmony. It also demonstrates that in a city of constant change, repurposing of a building does not always erase memories of its previous use.

Introduction

Singapore, with its skyscrapers, powerhouse economy and consumption culture, was the site of a 'dancing nun' religious controversy in 2012. The advertising of a dance party as a 'sacrilegious night of partying' with 'dancing nuns' sparked community outrage, referral to the police for charges of sedition, and the eventual cancellation of the party. Several crucial decisions by the organisers brought this about and, for Catholics, the offence was magnified by the coalescence of three factors: the publicity ('naughty nuns'), the date (Easter Saturday), and the venue (the former Chapel of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus). This article analyses these events and contextualises them with similar controversies which occurred concurrently—Taoist robes worn at a fashion parade organised by the Floral Designers Society Singapore, and the posters put up at the National University of Singapore by the Campus Crusade for Christ which sought participants for tours to proselytise for converts. The community and government responses to these perceived instances of insensitivity to religious faiths tell us much about modern Singapore, the power of state ideology, and the conflation of religious and racial harmony; a salient reminder that modernity is not the same as Westernisation. This article will also examine the changed use of the Chapel and show how place and history are intertwined so that memories of past uses of buildings can still surface in the midst of massive urban and social change.

The Singaporean Context

To fully understand these controversies, it is necessary to place them within the uniquely Singaporean context of rapid economic development since

Independence in 1965, coupled with government policies for the management of community cohesion and, in particular, racial harmony. Of a total population of 5.4 million people, 74.2% of Singaporeans are Chinese, 13.3% Malay, 9.2% Indian and 3.3% are designated as Other.¹ This mix reflects the country's origins as an important trading port for the British East India Company, attracting traders and workers from southern China and South-East Asia. In the aftermath of World War Two and with the decline in influence of the British Empire, the British agreed to limited self-government in 1959 and then amalgamation with Malaya in 1963 to form the new Federation of Malaysia. This arrangement was short lived. Singapore was ejected from the Federation in 1965 and suddenly found itself an independent nation. The subsequent economic and physical transformation has defined its journey 'from Third World to First'.² Despite its physical size of only 715 square kilometres, the island-state of Singapore now has a GDP ranking amongst the highest in the world.³

Sociologists Ien Ang and Jon Stratton have described Singapore as 'a contradiction in terms': it was largely unsettled when the British arrived in 1819 and so is unable to lay claim to a myth of indigenous origin, and its subsequent negotiation of independence has meant that it cannot present itself as having engaged in violent anti-colonial struggle, leading to a nation that is perceived as being 'both non-Western and always-already Westernized'.⁴ In this way, we can easily conflate economic growth with modernity, and modernity with Westernisation. Yet, along with its spectacular economic growth, Singapore is also famous for its historical dominance by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has held power since 1959. In the 2011 parliamentary election, opposition parties scored record gains, although the PAP still won 81 out of the 87 seats.⁵ Much of the discourse of Singapore scholars has been about the continued hegemony of the state through its policies on multiracialism, education, language and meritocracy, and its curbs on individual freedoms. Sociologist John Clammer, writing in the mid-1980s, argued that we can make the mistake of assuming that because Singapore has the *structure* of a Western parliamentary democracy, it actually *functions* like one. He argued that the government exercises social control, at one level, by its control of the bureaucracy, the education system, material rewards, the economy and the political system itself, and, at another level, by the production of an ideology which represents the government as having a monopoly on reasonableness and the correct definition of reality.⁶

Political scientists Peng Lam and Kevin Tan have called Singapore's economic growth, which has occurred without a corresponding increase in the political agency of its citizens, 'the paradox of Singapore', since it is precisely the

¹ Singapore Government, Department of Statistics, *Singapore in Figures 2013*, Singapore, p. 5.

² Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*, New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 2000.

³ For comparisons of Real Growth in GDP 2010, see Department of Statistics, *Singapore in Figures 2013*, p. 4.

⁴ I. Ang & J. Stratton, 'The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1995, pp. 67-68.

⁵ For a detailed examination of the 2011 elections, see K. Tan & T. Lee, *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Elections*, Singapore, Ethos Books, 2011.

⁶ J. Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture*, Singapore, Chopmen Publishers, 1985, pp. 161, 167.

economic growth and affluence which legitimise the ruling party and underpin one-party dominance.⁷ In other words, restrictions on individual freedoms are tolerated as long as the government keeps delivering growth, and are considered to be the acceptable price for economic development.⁸ Others have argued more recently that the social compact has evolved into a more complex relationship and that there is a slow but noticeable growing phenomenon of civil society activism.⁹ Nonetheless such changes are gradual, and in this article, I contend that the government and community reactions to perceived religious insensitivities reflect a specifically Singaporean response which is bound up with issues of social control and racial harmony. The multiracial nature of Singapore is often used by the government as a political fracture line which draws attention to race, making issues of race ever present in the community. This article examines the controversy over the Chapel Party in order to reveal how race is embedded within the idea of religious harmony in Singapore. It also examines the interplay between government control, community internalisation of the social goals of racial and religious harmony, and individual freedom of expression.

The other context for this article is the contested position of heritage conservation within the government's drive to make Singapore a modern global city. Singapore has been described by Singapore scholars Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis as a nation in 'perpetual constructionist mode'—the government is fixated on tangible acts of material construction of buildings and infrastructure, as its control is predicated on the idea that everything in Singapore works.¹⁰ Yet the preservation of heritage sites has become increasingly important to Singaporeans, which is, in part, a response to concerns that the 'real' Singapore is being lost in the transformation to a 'global' city.¹¹ Since the 1970s, there has been increased government attention paid to the conservation of heritage buildings and locales, with buildings often 're-purposed' for nation-building uses such as museums, or tendered out for commercial ventures. Many of these buildings are from the colonial era. Unlike some other former colonies, Singapore has embraced its colonial past, designating the colonial administrative centre, where the Convent was located, as the 'Civic District' and promoting it as a key area for tourism.

Post-colonialist Robbie Goh has argued that colonial buildings are 'cultural remainders' which are 'simultaneously invoked and repudiated, elevated for their "historical" and "social" importance while neutered of their specific political-

⁷ P. Lam & K. Tan, *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard*, St. Leonards, Allen and Unwin, 1999, p. x.

⁸ See for example, C. George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1900-2000*, Singapore, Landmark Books, 2000.

⁹ See E. Tan, 'The Evolving Social Compact and the Transformation of Singapore: Going Beyond *Quid Pro Quo* in Governance' and R. Heng Hiang-Kheng, 'Suffer the Rebellious Children: The Politics of Remaking Singapore and the Remaking of Singapore Politics', in T. Chong (ed.), *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2010.

¹⁰ M. Barr & Z. Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2008, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ See for example, B. Yeoh & L. Kong, 'The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage', in Kwok Kian Woon et al. (eds.), *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, Singapore, Singapore Heritage Society, 1999.

cultural signification'.¹² Yet, as cultural theorist Michel de Certeau reminds us, it is the 'ordinary practitioners of the city' who walk and experience a city everyday, and who use and transform its space.¹³ He proposed that the places people live in are 'like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there...the invisible identities of the visible'.¹⁴ For de Certeau, the very definition of a place is that it is made up of these displacements and moving layers, so that it is memory that ties us to a place.¹⁵ The historian Pierre Nora also wrote of 'places of memory' which are material, symbolic and functional, and are created by 'a play of memory and history'.¹⁶ Despite its global city status, Singapore has a remarkable number of moving layers, complicating the relationship between memory and place.¹⁷ For example, the Singaporean government's launch in 1997 of the 'Singapore Story', the officially sanctioned history of the nation to be taught in all schools, recognised Stamford Raffles as the founder of Singapore.¹⁸ Consequently, the 'invisible identities' of the city inevitably include the colonial. So in modern, 'globalised' and secular Singapore, the memories of the colonial Convent could still become visible and activated when the Chapel Party was perceived to be disrespectful of those memories.

From sacred to secular?

The events and controversy surrounding the cancelled Chapel Party are intrinsically bound up with the history of the proposed venue, the former Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) and its 're-purposing' into the 'lifestyle destination', CHIJMES—pronounced 'chimes', drawing on the Convent's acronym and the sound of church bells. The Convent, located in Victoria Street and opposite the Catholic Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, has played an important role in the education of girls in Singapore since its establishment in 1854, when the Dames de St Maur, a French teaching order, first came to Singapore.¹⁹ The Convent grew quickly to encompass a school for day students and boarders, a women's refuge and an orphanage for the growing number of children left at the Convent gate. The Chapel, designed in the Gothic architectural style, was consecrated in 1904 and was 'undoubtedly the grandest religious building in Singapore at the time'.²⁰ Additional buildings were gradually acquired or built as needed, such as for the establishment

¹² R. Goh, 'Evangelical Economics and Abjected Spaces: Cultural Territorialisation in Singapore', in R. Bishop, J. Phillips & W. Yeo (eds.), *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 102.

¹³ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984, p. 93.

¹⁴ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 108.

¹⁵ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 108.

¹⁶ P. Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire', *Representations*, vol. 26, 1989, pp. 7-24.

¹⁷ For a discussion of place and memory in Singapore, see for example, Loh Kah Seng & Liew Kai Khuin (eds.), *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History*, Singapore, Ethos Books, 2010.

¹⁸ Loh Kah Seng, 'Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1998, pp. 1-21.

¹⁹ See L. Kong, Low Soon Ai & J. Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore*, Singapore, Armour Publishing, 1994; E. Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus Singapore: 150 Years in Singapore*, Penang, The Lady Superior of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2004.

²⁰ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, p. 52.

of a school for Chinese girls in 1933, until eventually the Convent occupied an entire city block.

The substantial parcel of land in a central civic and commercial position made the Convent site an attractive acquisition for the Singapore government in 1980 when it was seeking to expand the underground Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) system. The site was taken over by the government in exchange for relocating the Sisters and the schools to two other sites in suburban Singapore. Some Convent buildings were demolished to enable a headquarters for the MRT Corporation to be built, and in 1990, the Urban Redevelopment Authority put the remainder of the complex out to tender to private developers. There were some concerns expressed at the time, primarily by the alumni making up the Old Girls Association of the Convent schools. The Association petitioned the Minister for National Development to 'preserve the dignity of their old school site'.²¹ Letters in the leading national newspaper, the *Straits Times*, debated whether another shopping centre was needed and questioned the government's commitment to heritage conservation. There was no legal appeal option available however and the impetus of the state for economic development prevailed.

In preparation for the closure of the Convent at the Victoria Street site, students staged a pageant of the 'Convent Story', and an Open Day was held on 5 November 1983 for all who wanted to view the complex a final time. Symbolically, the day operated almost as if it were a funeral wake for the death of the Convent. It included a variety of memorialising events: visitors were encouraged to sign guest registers, a video of the pageant and of a Singapore Broadcasting Corporation program on the story of the school were screened, school furniture was sold off or given away, and a fun fair was held. The *Straits Times*, which had already published several articles on the Convent's history, noted that

the old students streamed in as early as 7a.m...They came alone, in groups of two and more, yet others came with their husbands, boyfriends or parents...Mothers showed their children their former classrooms...others took photographs with their friends and of familiar spots.²²

In the evening, mass was celebrated in the Chapel for the last time and 'was jam-packed with people. When the seats ran out some sat on the floor, some stood at the doors and others looked in through the windows'.²³ The mass, and the later demolition of the altar, effectively deconsecrated the Chapel as a religious site, technically transitioning it from a sacred to a secular space.

In October 1990, the Chapel and Caldwell House where the nuns had lived were declared National Monuments. The successful developer, Cloisters Investment Pte Ltd, spent one hundred million Singapore dollars on the restoration and development of the Convent site, which reopened in 1996 as CHIJMES. It is promoted as 'a premier lifestyle destination' and contains a number of restaurants,

²¹ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, p. 80.

²² G. Chng, 'Convent's old girls say last goodbye', *Straits Times*, 6 November 1983.

²³ Chng, 'Convent's old girls say last goodbye'.

bars and small shops.²⁴ The Chapel, now called CHIJMES Hall, is available to hire for weddings, parties and other events.

The Chapel Party

In April 2012, CHIJMES Hall was hired by a Singapore company, Creative Insurgence, on behalf of a UK-based recording label and nightclub brand, Escape Swansea and Escape Recording, exploring the viability of expanding into Asia. The Escape Chapel Party was scheduled for Saturday 7 April, which fell during the Catholic Holy Week of Easter. In reference to the previous use of the site as a convent, the party was promoted as 'a sacrilegious night of partying' with 'dancing nuns'. There was widespread and vocal opposition to the party almost immediately, from both Singaporean Catholics and non-Catholics.

The poster for the event showed a photograph of a glamorous young white woman in a tight-fitting party dress wearing a nun's wimple and veil.²⁵ Her arms are exposed, she is wearing bright red lipstick, her head is tilted back and she is standing in a sexually provocative pose. The wimple and veil are prominent and serve as a contrast to the tight sleeveless dress and almost orgasmic pose of the woman. The Facebook page for the party included two other photographs of women in short nun's habits. The first was again of a young white woman wearing a short nun costume. The second photograph showed two young Singaporean women who distributed promotional flyers about the party in nearby shopping centres whilst wearing similarly skimpy nun's costumes. The photograph was posted on the Facebook site with accompanying comments from the Director of Creative Insurgence claiming that, 'It's gonna be a wild night...with Dancing nuns' and '[a] sneak preview of what our girls will be wearing on the 7th of April' [sic].²⁶

This latter photograph in particular was widely criticised on social media in Singapore. One twenty-four year-old woman who had seen the women handing out flyers was quoted in the media as saying, 'I was shocked and offended that they were allowed to walk around in such an offensive costume'.²⁷ Singaporean advertisers in local and global magazines tend to use white models far more than local Asian models, and white models are preferred more frequently when portraying sensuality in advertisements.²⁸ The practice of using white models to portray sexuality fits with a process of 'otherness'—that is, they are already not 'Singaporean', so they can behave in such a way. The photographs of the young Asian women in the short nun costumes went against this usual commercial practice, making the photographs appear more shocking and adding to the unease apparent in the public's response.

²⁴ See www.chijmes.com.sg/tourist_about.php, (accessed 26 August 2013).

²⁵ L. Tan, 'Party theme riles Catholics', *The New Paper*, 5 April 2012.

²⁶ J. Tan, 'Police investigate CHIJMES "Chapel Party"', *Yahoo News*, 5 April 2012, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/chijmes-'chapel-party'-draws-flak-from-catholic-community.html>, (accessed 27 July 2012).

²⁷ Tan, 'Police investigate CHIJMES "Chapel Party"'.

²⁸ K. Frith, 'Commercializing Beauty: A Comparison of Global and Local Magazine Advertisements in Singapore', in K. Frith & K. Karan (eds.), *Commercializing Women: Images of Asian Women in the Media*, Cresskill, N.J., Hampton Press, 2008, pp. 85-86.

The second problem for the party organisers was the intended date of the party—Easter Saturday, during the most holy week of the Christian calendar, falling after Good Friday (which symbolises the death of Christ), and before Easter Sunday (which symbolises the Resurrection of Christ). Creative Insurgence’s Director said that the date of the party was coincidental as it was the first date available. For the Catholic community, this added to the perceived insensitivity of the organisers to their religious faith.

However the venue was the crucial factor that particularly offended Catholics and ‘Old Girls’. Had the party been proposed for a different venue, Catholics might have still felt offended by the timing and theme; but the fact that it was to have taken place in the Chapel focussed and magnified the issue because it brought the original use of the building as a Catholic Chapel to the fore. Even though the Chapel had been deconsecrated and was no longer considered a religious building, the memory of its original purpose remained, as evidenced in a statement by a young student who was one of the first people to make an official complaint about the party. She explained:

what really gets my goat is them trying to profiteer off making something sacred into something so offensive and crass...Freedom to hold a function in such a sacred place comes with the responsibility of using it with respect.²⁹

Social geographers Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh have described Singaporean places of worship and places of burial as ‘landscapes of sentiment’, which operate at both the personal and communal level to touch deeply-held beliefs and sentiments.³⁰ The large numbers of women in Singapore who had attended school at the Convent in Victoria Street meant that memories of the Convent were inevitably overlaid on the buildings and the site, despite its re-purposing. The use of the Chapel for wedding receptions and cultural events had been largely unchallenged and accepted, but the Escape Chapel Party, with its provocative religious imagery of nuns, and proposed timing on Holy Saturday, tapped into a deeply shared memory of the building’s original use, and was thus seen as a step too far.

Public opposition to the proposed party was intense. The Catholic Archbishop, Nicholas Chia, considered the publicity to be ‘an affront to Catholics’.³¹ He also drew attention to the venue and timing:

The fact that the party was to be held in what was once the CHIJ Chapel and on Holy Saturday compounded the disrespect not just to our faith but to the many women religious who have devoted their lives to God and who have contributed greatly to Singapore with their schools, homes and work with the poor.³²

²⁹ Tan, ‘Police investigate CHIJMES “Chapel Party”’.

³⁰ L. Kong & B. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Constructions of ‘Nation*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. 4.

³¹ Archbishop N. Chia, ‘Archbishop’s Message on CHIJMES Chapel Party Issue’, *Catholic News*, 22 April 2012.

³² Archbishop N. Chia, ‘Archbishop’s Message on CHIJMES Chapel Party Issue’.

Catholics make up about 7 percent of the Singaporean population, many of whom are alumni from the eleven CHIJ schools.³³ In addition, there are many non-Catholics who are alumni or are parents of children currently attending the schools who are thus likely to be sympathetic to Catholic values. An online Yahoo Poll asked whether the party should go ahead: of the 1103 respondents, 64% voted that it should not because it was 'an insult to the religion and its followers', and 13% thought that it should go ahead only if 'they ensure that it will not disrespect a religion'.³⁴ It is unclear how many of the respondents were Catholic, although *Yahoo! Singapore* wrote that 'Non-Catholic Singaporeans whom [we] spoke to reflected divided opinions on the issue as well, with some agreeing with the Catholics who were offended, and others saying that the party should go on'.³⁵

Complaints were made to the police that organisers were violating the Sedition Act, which prohibits insulting or denigrating any racial group or religion in Singapore. Complaints were also made to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.³⁶ Assistant Professor of Law Jack Lee was asked by the media for his opinion of any potential prosecution under the Sedition Act. He considered that the advertisement for the party technically fell within the definition of uttering seditious words or publishing a seditious publication, since a seditious tendency under the Act is defined as one that 'raise[s] discontent...among the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore'—so that the *intention* behind its creation was not relevant.³⁷ The Ministry of Home Affairs released a statement saying that there was 'no excuse' for behaviour that insulted or denigrated any religion. It suggested that Creative Insurgence might have breached one of the conditions of its licence to use the Chapel and that it could be liable to sanction.³⁸ The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs, Teo Chee Hean, emphasised that creative organisations must be mindful of 'social sensitivities', stating during a television interview that '[Singapore] is a multi-racial society, multi-religious society. Go out and have fun but don't do it at other people's expense'.³⁹

In response to the concerns about the event, the company managing the CHIJMES complex intervened. Its lawyers informed the company managing CHIJMES Hall, Watabe Weddings, that it should take immediate steps to stop the party going ahead. Faced with this wave of opposition and the cancellation of the event by CHIJMES management, the Director of Creative Insurgence wrote to the Archbishop apologising, saying that no offence had been intended and that the

³³ Department of Statistics, 'Singapore Census of Population 2010', Singapore, Government of Singapore, 2011. Figures are as a percentage of the total population of residents aged 15 years and over.

³⁴ Yahoo, 'Poll: Should the "Chapel Party" still go on?', <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/poll--should-the--chapel-party--still-go-on-.html>, (accessed 27 September 2013). Note that 20% voted, 'Yes, live and let live. Halloween parties have nun costumes anyway' and 3% 'cannot relate to this'.

³⁵ Tan, 'Police investigate CHIJMES "Chapel Party"'.

³⁶ Tan, 'Police investigate CHIJMES "Chapel Party"'.

³⁷ Tan, 'Police investigate CHIJMES "Chapel Party"'.

³⁸ Tan, 'Police investigate CHIJMES "Chapel Party"'.

³⁹ Interview, Channel News Asia, 7 April 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA5OIKNP581>, (accessed 15 February 2013).

incident was a reminder of ‘the need for mutual respect for all religions in our multi-racial country’.⁴⁰

Dressed for controversy

In using the image of nuns to promote the party, the organisers tapped into iconic symbolism deeply imbedded in both religious and secular Western culture. Historian Elizabeth Kuhns has written that the nun’s habit is ‘one of the most widely known and recognizable religious symbols of our time, an icon deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness’ and ‘a metaphor for the Catholic Church itself’.⁴¹ Historically, the habit signified ‘the dedication of the body to the heavenly Spouse’.⁴² Art Historian Helen Hills has posited that it was the veil that was paramount symbolically, since it ‘both obscured the nun’s sight as it hid her face from view and rendered the nun metonymically the altar of sacrifice’.⁴³ She further argued that it ‘also became a sign in itself, an acknowledgment of the beauty and temptation of the nun’s face beneath it. Thus, in truly Foucauldian fashion, the practice of veiling signified the sexual allure of the veiled enclosed nun’.⁴⁴ This is the paradox of the veiled nun according to Kuhns, because she ‘seems both less than female but greater than human’.⁴⁵ Yet, as novelist Mary Gordon suggests, at the same time ‘the image, the idea, of a nun brings together three powerful elements: God, women, and sex’.⁴⁶ In the poster advertising the party, the skimpiness of the dress and the model’s pose emphasised the erotic, and was consequently directly at odds with the religious symbolism of the nun ‘sealed in chastity’.⁴⁷ The Facebook photographs of the ‘naughty nuns’ are reminiscent of the whip-wielding nun popular in pornography in the Victorian Age, and the ‘naughty nun’ costume remains available and popular today.⁴⁸ In using the images of the ‘naughty nun’, the Escape Chapel Party promotional material simultaneously juxtaposed and mingled all of these deep and powerful Christian and Western tropes.

Somewhat surprisingly, the Director of Creative Insurgence told the media that ‘we would like to clarify that the images contained no religious symbolism’, and that this also applied to ‘teasers that said nuns will be at the party—we meant the secularised, costume version that contains no religious symbolism’.⁴⁹ The Archbishop undoubtedly expressed the incredulity of most Catholics when he responded with, ‘What are the nun’s habit and the rosary if not Catholic?’⁵⁰ Yet the issue may be somewhat more complex, as material culture can have a number of meanings. The Christian cross, for example, is both a deeply religious symbol for

⁴⁰ Interview, Channel News Asia, 7 April 2012.

⁴¹ E. Kuhns, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns*, New York, Doubleday, 2003, pp. 7, 14.

⁴² H. Hills, *Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 170.

⁴³ Hills, *Invisible City*, p. 171.

⁴⁴ Hills, *Invisible City*, p. 171.

⁴⁵ Kuhns, *The Habit*, p. 8.

⁴⁶ M. Gordon, ‘Women of God’, *Atlantic Monthly*, January 2002, p. 66.

⁴⁷ Hills, *Invisible City*, p. 170.

⁴⁸ Kuhns, *The Habit*, p. 130.

⁴⁹ Tan, ‘Police investigate CHIJMES “Chapel Party”’.

⁵⁰ Archbishop N. Chia, ‘Archbishop’s Message on CHIJMES Chapel Party Issue’.

Christians, as well as, for some wearers, solely a fashionable piece of jewellery. In this sense, 'modern' and 'Western' have become conflated, and the iconography of religious items can be forgotten or relegated to the past.

The reading of material culture also presupposes some measure of familiarity with the culture from which objects arise. I suggest that in a multi-racial, multi-religious country such as Singapore, we cannot assume that the religious symbols of one faith will be understood by those of another faith or those of no faith. In her historical and architectural analysis of an Italian church, Margaret Visser wrote that 'in churches, especially Roman Catholic churches, I am a 'native', and a lot of what is going on I have known since childhood'.⁵¹ She recounted seeing a guide showing a Japanese tourist around a church in Spain, pointing out the superb stone vaulting:

The tourist did not even raise his head to look at this. He stared aghast—as well he might—at a horrific, life-sized painted carving of a bleeding man nailed to two pieces of wood. When the guide stopped talking, the man gestured wordlessly towards the statue.⁵²

The guide, Visser tells us, nodded, smiled, and told him in which century it had been carved. The statue of the crucified Christ was so familiar to the guide that he or she did not realise that the Japanese tourist saw it, not as a religious symbol, but rather as the figure of a person being tortured. We can miss the significance of things if we do not have the specific cultural knowledge, and perhaps this was also a factor at work in the ill-fated Chapel Party.

Just one week after the controversy over the Chapel Party, another religious group was similarly offended by a model wearing religious robes. The Floral Designers Society Singapore (FDSS) held a fashion show during a gala dinner in March and then later posted a photograph of one of the models wearing a red Taoist priest's robe and carrying a 'ruyi', a sceptre used by Taoist priests.⁵³ The Taoist Federation Youth Group was offended that religious attire had been worn, and that it had been worn 'in a provocative manner'. At least two complaints were made to the police, one by a Taoist priest who said that he felt humiliated by the photograph. The FDSS removed the photographs from the Facebook page, and its President said that 'we were not aware of the religious significance of the robe as we are not clothing specialists'.⁵⁴ Here again we have the issue of clothing as material culture being understood by some as secular, and by others as religious, attire. Media reports also drew parallels between the Chapel Party upset and the Taoist robe controversy, since both had invoked similar issues of religious sensitivity and harmony.⁵⁵

⁵¹ M. Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church*, Toronto, Harper Perennial, 2000, p. 3.

⁵² Visser, *The Geometry of Love*, p. 1.

⁵³ Lee Xin En, 'Taoists upset over priest's robe worn at fashion show', *Straits Times*, 10 April 2012; Lee Xin En, 'Taoist robe in fashion show sparks furore', *Straits Times*, 12 April 2012.

⁵⁴ Lee, 'Taoist robe in fashion show sparks furore'.

⁵⁵ Lee, 'Taoist robe in fashion show sparks furore'.

The conflation of religious harmony and racial harmony

In order to understand why Singaporeans have a heightened sense of the fragility of religious harmony, as evidenced by the Chapel Party controversy and the Taoist robe controversy, we need to understand how religion and race are conflated in Singapore. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat has argued that, at Independence in 1965, the immigrant nature of Singapore's population meant that no conventional unity of race, land and culture could be evoked as the basis for the new nation.⁵⁶ The largest ethnic group was Chinese with no proprietary claim to the land, and the nominally indigenous group, the Malays, were a distinct demographic minority. The solution was for Singapore to declare itself a constitutional multi-racial nation in which the ethnic cultures of the Chinese, Indians and Malays would be treated equally, whilst at the same time recognising the Malays as the indigenous people. The race riots of the 1950s and 1960s are often invoked to demonstrate the fragility of racial harmony and the importance of not causing offence to other races. Yet Chua has argued that in practice 'racial harmony' operates as a repressive device which suppresses, rather than encourages, debate and discussion of grievances about discrimination and structural inequalities.⁵⁷ Other Singapore scholars have also argued that the government is continuously engaged in the artificial creation of 'crises', as a means of reinforcing its competence in overcoming them, and thus the importance of its continued role in power. This sense of impending racial 'crisis' encourages Singaporeans to be constantly vigilant to guard against potential racial conflict.⁵⁸

In Singapore, religious harmony is considered a key cornerstone of racial harmony. The government introduced the Religious Knowledge Program into all secondary schools in 1984 to reflect the religious diversity of the community and to strengthen 'moral values' so as to counteract the perceived excesses of Westernisation.⁵⁹ It was discontinued at the end of the decade for a number of reasons: government concern that some religious traditions included an active commitment to social justice; that some religious centres were becoming potential alternative centres for mobilising public opinion; and the relative unpopularity of the Confucian option in the program.⁶⁰ Legislation has been a more effective instrument of the state in this area. The Sedition Act prohibits the denigration of any religion, as well as evangelical activity where proselytising speech offends persons of other religions.⁶¹ The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, 1990 (MRHA) makes it an offence to cause 'feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between

⁵⁶ Chua Beng Huat, 'The Cultural Logic of a Capitalist Single-Party State, Singapore', *Post Colonial Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2010, p. 337.

⁵⁷ Chua, 'The Cultural Logic of a Capitalist Single-Party State', p. 337.

⁵⁸ Chua Beng Huat, 'Being Chinese under Official Multiculturalism in Singapore', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2009, p. 244; N. Tarulevich, 'Singapore's Race and Ethnicity Policies', in N. Tarling & T. Gomez (eds.), *The State: Development and Identity in Multi-Ethnic Societies*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 134-153.

⁵⁹ For a detailed account, see Chapter 2 of J. Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul: Western Modernization and Asian Culture*, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1996.

⁶⁰ Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul*, p. 49.

⁶¹ J. Ling-Chen Neo, 'Seditious in Singapore: Free Speech and the Offence of Promoting Ill-Will and Hostility between Different Racial Groups', *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies*, Dec. 2011, pp. 351-372.

different religious groups';⁶² restraining orders can be issued against religious leaders who do so. The MRHA came into being after the Singapore government had acted against a number of Catholic social justice activists in the 1980s, accused of being Marxists planning to overthrow the government. Michael Barr has argued that no-one, including the government, seriously believed that the priest and lay workers, who were inspired by liberation theology, were actually Marxists.⁶³ They were however 'blurring the line between politics and religion', and had the ability to organise across issues and organisations. Barr argued that the government was playing a 'larger game', and saw this as an opportunity to intimidate and shut down the capacity of activists to challenge the government's control over the public agenda.⁶⁴ The MRHA was introduced and made it an offence for religious bodies to engage in politics.

Legal scholar Jothie Rajah has argued that in Singapore, 'religion' is understood to be associated with the potential to generate disorder and violence that threatens political security—and which only the state can hold at bay by legal constraints.⁶⁵ Under the MRHA, *intention* does not have to be proved and there is no provision for a trial or legal representation.⁶⁶ Rajah argued that the Act's simplicity of language and concepts portrays the state's hegemony presented as common sense.⁶⁷ The Act has never been used—the Sedition Act is more potent—but Rajah argued that the MRHA does not actually *need* to be enforced to be effective, as its value to the state 'lies primarily in the discourse that it enabled'.⁶⁸ We can see this evidenced in the Chapel Party discourse: religious sensibilities were 'offended', or there was a fear that they might be; the party organisers unsuccessfully argued that they did not intend to offend; the importance of religious harmony was invoked; referral to the police was regarded as a normalised response; and ultimately, charges did not need to be formally laid because sufficient community pressure caused the cancellation of the party.

Offensive posters?

Further controversy over religious sensitivities occurred at about the same time as the other two controversial events previously discussed; in February 2012, when the National University of Singapore Campus Crusade for Christ (NCCC) was sanctioned for posters displayed on campus and on their website.⁶⁹ The posters sought participants for trips to Thailand and Turkey to encourage conversions to

⁶² Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Section 8(1)(a), Singapore.

⁶³ M. Barr, 'Marxists in Singapore? Lee Kuan Yew's Campaign against Catholic Social Justice Activists in the 1980s', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2010, pp. 335-362.

⁶⁴ Barr, 'Marxists in Singapore?', pp. 338,357.

⁶⁵ J. Rajah, 'Policing Religion: Discursive Excursions into Singapore's Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act', in *Examining Practice, Interrogating Theory: Comparative Legal Studies*, in P. Nicholson & S. Biddulph (eds.), *Asia*, Boston, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008, p. 275.

⁶⁶ Rajah, 'Policing Religion', p. 277.

⁶⁷ Rajah, 'Policing Religion', p. 277.

⁶⁸ Rajah, 'Policing Religion', p. 299.

⁶⁹ J. Lim & S. Chia, 'Christian group says sorry for remarks: MHA probing its comments on Buddhists, Muslims', *Straits Times*, 17 February 2012.

Christianity. The advertisement for the Thailand trip, which included a photograph of Buddhist monks, asked,

Did you know that Thailand is a place of little true joy? Buddhism is so much a part of the Thai national identity and permeates into every level of society and culture that only about one hundred Thais accept Christ each year.

The advertisement for the Turkey trip began with 'In a country where much of the population is M, much prayer and work is needed in this place'. The letter M in the advertisement stood in place of the word 'Muslim'—perhaps this was an attempt to 'fly under the radar' and avoid controversy, but in Singapore this would have been read by Singaporeans as standing in place of the full word. In addition to the potential offence to Muslims generally, there are additional sensitivities in Singapore, where, because Malays are the most homogeneous ethnic community in religious terms, Malay ethnicity and Islam have been conflated.⁷⁰ Complaints were made to the police that the posters were offensive to Buddhists and Muslims. The Ministry of Home Affairs urged the public to stop adding comments to the NCCC Facebook post as it could 'further inflame the situation'.⁷¹ The university suspended the group and the NCCC apologised publicly.⁷²

The Minister of Education was asked a Parliamentary Question and stated that 'this incident reminds all of us not to take racial and religious harmony for granted and that we must be sensitive and vigilant on matters of race and religion'.⁷³ Although the police did not take action, the university convened a Board of Discipline hearing for NCCC executive committee members in September 2012 and required the NCCC to submit a 'reflection report', which would include steps that the NCCC had taken to ensure that a similar incident would not occur again. The Minister was subsequently asked in Parliament in March 2013 to give an update on the matter, again indicating the seriousness with which the posters, which might be considered innocuous in many countries, were taken in Singapore.⁷⁴ Symbolically, responsibility for overseeing and constraining the actions of the students had moved from the university to the state. The Singapore government has been likened by some to a 'state fatherhood'—the state as the wise and benevolent father who acts to resolve disputes and maintain family harmony—and in this instance, the Minister, as the representative of the state, was ensuring that the young people had been appropriately disciplined and guided.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ L. Rahmin, 'Governing Muslims in Singapore's Secular Authoritarian State', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2012, p. 171.

⁷¹ Lim & Chia, 'Christian group says sorry for remarks'.

⁷² Lim & Chia, 'Christian group says sorry for remarks'.

⁷³ See www.moe.gov.sg/media/parliamentary-replies/2012/07/religious-harmony-in-institute.php, (accessed 24 September 2013).

⁷⁴ See www.moe.gov.sg/media/parliamentary-replies/2013/03/updates-on-the-nus-campus-crusade-for-christ-case.php, (accessed 24 September 2013).

⁷⁵ See for example, G. Heng & J. Devan, 'State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore', in A. Parker et al. (eds.), *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, New York, Routledge, 1992.

In the midst of the controversies about the Chapel Party, the Taoist robe worn in the fashion show and the Campus Christians for Christ posters, the NUS student newspaper the *Kent Ridge Common* published an article asking, 'How should we resolve religious disputes?'⁷⁶ The authors argued that the cancellation of the Chapel Party and other incidents such as the fashion show and the NCCC controversy all raised questions:

[W]hat is the proper relationship between religious groups and the state? More specifically, at what juncture should the state step in to defend a particular religious group's interests and/or preferences, or police their actions? Must we always involve the state, or can we, as members of society, engage each other in constructive discussion and resolve matters without resorting to the police?

These questions perceptively go to the heart of the issue, asking how nation-states should appropriately deal with religion, and the rights of citizens to the expression of religious faith. Singapore is constitutionally a secular state but has chosen to broker perceived religious conflicts under the banner of maintaining religious harmony in society. In this scenario, the state acts as the 'neutral' arbitrator, since religious disharmony is viewed as leading to racial disharmony, and therefore potential conflict that could imperil the state. The article encouraged people to refrain from rushing to involve the state via the police or other legal recourse, and instead attempt to resolve matters through dialogue. This is indicative of how the notion of the fragility of social harmony has been internalised, so that it seems only natural that incidents that might be considered merely insensitive are considered significant enough to *need* resolution.

Conclusion

The cancellation of the Chapel Party demonstrates the privileging in Singapore of religious sensitivities so that religious harmony, and thus racial harmony, in society is maintained. It also demonstrates that in a city of constant change, re-purposing of a building does not always erase the memories of its original use. Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong have argued that in Singapore, places can remain significant for individuals because they are repositories of memory, and that communal sites 'are similarly textured by multiple layers of everyday meanings and sedimented history. When personalised and collectivised meanings intersect, place meanings are augmented'.⁷⁷ Architects and urban geographers have, in recent years, come to apply the word 'palimpsest' to buildings. The word has traditionally referred to a manuscript or tablet, on which later writing has been superimposed over effaced earlier writing, but with traces of the old writing possibly remaining. Andreas Huyssen, in his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of*

⁷⁶ Tan Xiang Yeow & Koh Choon Hwee, 'How should we resolve religious disputes?', *Kent Ridge Common*, 21 August 2012.

⁷⁷ B. Yeoh & L. Kong (eds.), *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, Singapore, Times Editions, 1995, p. 14.

Memory, noted that 'we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space'.⁷⁸ He argued that there is an 'urban imaginary', which 'in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what was there before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses and heterotopias'.⁷⁹ For Singapore, a city-state, there is an urban imaginary that has a complex temporal reach.

The Chapel of the former Convent is well known to most Singaporeans, many of whom attended school at the site. The controversy over the Chapel Party with its use of 'naughty nun' imagery shows that the deconsecration of the Chapel did not totally erase its religious meaning, and that the transition from the sacred to the secular was not fully achieved. Faint though the traces may seem to the casual visitor of the site, for Singaporeans, traces of the old remain under the layers of new meanings. This palimpsest was exposed and brought into play in 2012 when the Escape Chapel Party was proposed to take place there on a Catholic holy day. Despite the re-purposing of the Chapel, its original meaning remained in the community's memory, and was defended when the Chapel Party organisers were seen as disrespecting that memory. What the party unwittingly brought to the fore was the original use of the building as a Catholic Chapel, and the layers of meaning applied to the building were figuratively stripped away, down to the stones themselves, to reveal the memory of that original meaning still present there.

⁷⁸ A. Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 7.