

Faith-based fissures take many forms

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Religion continues to be a source of contestation over space the world over, because religion finds expression in space, such as through the establishment of religious buildings and the practice of religious rituals, including those that traverse space, such as pilgrimages and processions.

Particularly in land-scarce countries and cities, contestation over space is to be expected. For example, secular needs can come into collision with sacred values invested in place. When religious buildings make way for public needs, such as housing and public amenities, it can lead to a severe sense of loss for some communities.

While we tend to think of conflict and contestation as being between religions, or between the religious and secular, it might come as a surprise that the same can occur within religions. Thus, denominational, sectarian differences can divide those from the same religious community, and this can manifest itself in spatial contestations.

Race, class, gender and religion are all key axes that can cause cleavages in society. Sometimes, the connectedness of two or more of these can create quite explosive outcomes.

In Asia, India has a long history of religious divides that find expression in spatial conflict. The case of Babri Masjid – a mosque in Ayodhya in northern India that was pulled down in 1992 by Hindu mobs led to believe that the site was the birthplace of Rama – illustrates the violence that can erupt.

In Singapore, we have managed inter-religious and secular-religious relations well and the conflicts and contestations are carefully tended. While there have been occasions in the past when religious buildings have been relocated or demolished, there have not been outbreaks of violence as have occurred elsewhere.

Part of it is due to the successful appeal to the larger public good. Part of it is because of the replacement of sites through careful management.

But it is important to recognise that conflicts and contestations do not just occur between religions, or between the religious and the secular, but within religions as well.

In Hindu temples, for example, new migrant Indian communities bring different cultural practices and behavioural patterns that sit uncomfortably with local Indian habits. While the state has played a significant role in the management of inter-religious and religious-secular relations, it is not so clear how it can intervene in intra-religious relations.

This is where religious leaders need to be mindful of the dynamics within their organisations and to consider how to manage potential tensions and conflicts.

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