Religious competition: How to keep the good, minimise the bad

Resilience in a multi-religious society comes from trust within and between religious groups, and between religious and secular groups.

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For The Straits Times

Religious competition is a common feature of pluralistic societies where religious groups compete for adherents, as well as for scarce resources like funds and space, both among themselves and with secular groups. More abstractly, they compete for hegemonic status in people's personal and social lives.

The common observation is that religious competition leads to disharmony in multi-religious societies. Indeed, religious competition can degenerate into disruptive conflict and destabilising violence that implicates and affects both religious and secular groups while exacting economic cost on societies in numerous ways: lower productivity, a riskier investment climate and strains on state resources due to increased need for policing, surveillance and rehabilitation. In its most extreme form, religious competition can escalate into the uncompromising desire by one or more religious groups to consign all others to extinction. Such desires can have wide-ranging consequences that infringe on both religious and civil liberties.

Examples of religious competition, conflict and violence are, unfortunately, abundant around the world. Such disharmony can result firstly from conflicting claims to ownership, such as when different groups claim ownership of a site. Take the case of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in the Northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Ayodhya is believed to be the birthplace of Rama, a deified figure in the Hindu religious tradition. More specifically, Hindus believe Babri Mosque to be located on the site of an ancient temple for Rama, and that it was the Mughal patriarch Babur who built the mosque on the site. The ownership of the site remained keenly contested between Hindus and Muslims, and culminated in a Hindu mob demolishing the mosque in 1992. The incident sparked widespread communal riots throughout the country, resulting in more than 1,000 deaths.

In Singapore, the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950 were triggered by the contest over "ownership" (rightful parenthood) of Maria – whether it belonged to her biological Dutch Catholic parents or the Muslim foster mother who brought her up. Properties were damaged, 18 were killed and nearly 200 injured.

A second type of claim that results in disharmony relates to who has the authority to decide what can be practised and how space can be used, for instance. An example of this competition for authority is the attempt by governments to regulate the use of loudspeakers in mosques for the Muslim call to prayer, and the subsequent contestation by Muslims of that authority claim. Especially in the Western world, bans on the use of loudspeakers in mosques have received widespread public sympathy in places ranging from Bavaria and Cologne in Germany to Oxford in the United Kingdom to Michigan in the United States. Objections have been made on the grounds of disturbance of public peace, noise pollution, and the Islamisation of the locality. Many Muslim groups and leaders cite the freedom for religious expression as grounds for continued use of loudspeakers, while proponents (mostly secular individuals, members of other religious groups and state officials) point out that the use of loudspeakers is not central to Islamic practice and has no scriptural precedent. The issue is deeply divisive and routinely generates religion-state conflict over secular authority and religious autonomy in religious spaces. Such conflicts may not have resulted in violence but they constitute points of tension in plural societies.

COMPETITION AND HARMONY

While cases of religious conflict and violence abound, it is important to remember that religious competition can also have positive consequences. It opens up religious choice for individuals. It has the potential to augment social welfare, for example, through the increased provision of psychological and social support services through religious networks. In other words, religious competition can exist without acrimonious disharmony, and does not invariably escalate into conflict and violence. Indeed, societies that exhibit religious diversity and experience religious competition may benefit from that pluralism.

But such harmonious co-existence needs conscious effort from all relevant parties. It is not the sole responsibility of any single group. It requires even-handed public policy, sensitive handling, swift and firm intervention when needed, open-minded religious leaders and adherents, and equally broad-minded non-adherents. It requires public education and constant reinforcement about the importance of common space and the dangers of allowing fissures to become fractures. It requires continual strengthening of shared vision, collective purpose, and common identity.

The cases of the Babri Mosque and Maria Hertogh demonstrate the need for governments to help ensure that negative religious competition is contained before they erupt into violence.

For a religiously diverse society, Singapore has escaped religiously kindled violence for a few decades. In part, this has been achieved through careful management, sensitive social policy and overall, even-handed urban policy. It has been possible with open-minded and thoughtful leadership of religious organisations, and generally, a citizenry committed to multiculturalism, multiracialism and multireligiosity as key tenets of Singapore society. But as the world changes, globalisation and related phenomena require that we are still more sensitive to the vulnerabilities of pluralism.

GLOBALISATION AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE

It has been observed that globalisation has reinforced and deepened religious consciousness, rather than diminished it. This is contrary to earlier thinking that globalisation would exacerbate the effects of modernisation on religion, where societies become less religious as they modernise. The secularisation thesis, as the phenomenon has been called, has since been renounced by Professor Peter Berger, a renowned sociologist who had once predicted the secularisation of the world.

First, many scholars argue that religious revivalism is a reaction to the anomic processes and pressures of a globalised world.

Second, with growing migration, the result has been a significantly more plural religious demography in many parts of the world. As people migrate, they bring along with them their religious beliefs, practices, and identities. New religions, and different religious traditions and practices of the same religion may be brought into contact with established practices. Diasporic communities often also wish to preserve a distinct identity, which may lead to the establishment of religious minorities. The literature on immigrant churches illustrates this.

Third, new technologies greatly enhance the ability of religious groups to disseminate religious messages and religious content widely and rapidly. This also means that what happens in one part of the world is instantaneously known in another part of the world, and any conflict and violence is brought home in stark and visual ways before authorities have a chance to react and manage. Further, ease of access to religious doctrine on the Internet and even the possibility of practice of religious ritual in the virtual world have made it easier for individuals to participate in religion. The sources of religious influence are also widened. Traditional authority structures within religious organisations may be challenged. Self-radicalisation is an unfortunate reality.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

Given the myriad forces enabling individual engagement with religion, inter-religious interactions, and religious-secular intersections in a globalised world, new threats have surfaced. Radicalisation (self- or other-initiated), terrorism threats, Islamophobia, growing distance between religious and secular values, intra-religious tensions, religious identities and allegiances vis-a-vis larger national identities and allegiances – these are common challenges that confront many societies in the contemporary world, all of which can result in divisive conflict and debilitating violence. Singapore is not immune.

Singapore has tried to build its bulwarks against threats of violence. We have built our intelligence capabilities, border controls, gun laws, security forces, and are doing still more through the national SGSecure movement.

But, most fundamentally, the protection and resilience we require rely on the ability of a people to absorb, adapt to or mitigate the influence of negative stressors, including any conflict and violence resulting from religious competition, and relating – even in misled and misinterpreted ways – to religious beliefs. For such resilience to truly develop, strong ties of trust are critical, trust within religious groups, and from a broader state-societal perspective, trust between religious groups as well as between religious and secular groups. These ties take time to build, and require us to have a common understanding of what challenges we face, a willingness to think about them together, and a healthy discourse about how to address them. They also require an openness to the commonality of beliefs and values, even practices, across religions, and between religion and secular morality.

Religious groups can help to build such social resilience in the form of strong intra- and inter-religious relationships developed during "peace time", that is, when threats – whether economic, political, social, cultural or environmental – are not imminent.

It is in this context that community-initiated projects such as the Harmony in Diversity Gallery – officially launched this month by President Tony Tan Keng Yam – take on an immensely important role. Mooted by the Inter-Religious Organisation last year as an endeavour to value and sustain our religious and social harmony, the Gallery was developed by the Ministry of Home Affairs in collaboration with community partners.

Such public education efforts contribute to building a shared understanding of our history in inter-religious relations and contemporary challenges, and provide a common framework within which negative changes in the external environment can be interpreted and understood. They allow differences to be discussed under amicable conditions, and a younger generation to appreciate the nation's past challenges. In simultaneously contributing to a better understanding of commonalities across religions in values and practices, the Gallery also allows for positive dimensions of religious diversity to be harnessed.

Singapore is not exempt from the traditional dangers of inter-religious conflict and violence, nor from the new threats of radicalisation, global terrorism and Islamophobia. As a multi-religious society where God is far from dead (to paraphrase German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's famous line), the only way to develop our defences against the negative consequences of religious diversity and the hijacking of religion is to focus insistently on the benefits that religious pluralism can bring, to support and enable those benefits to be reaped, to put the spotlight on commonalities, while acknowledging the histories of divisiveness as a reminder of where we do not want the nation to be.

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Religious leaders – (from left) Swami Jitamansananda (Hinduism), Rabbi Mardoche Abergel (Judaism), Ervad Rustom M Ghadiali (Zoroastrianism), Ven. Shi Xiang Yang (Buddhism), Master Chung Kwang Tong (Taoism), Jayantilal Amarshi Govindji (Jainism), Rev. Haraneath Singh (Christianity), Aladad Khan Mulladad Khan (Islam), Gurmit Singh (Sikhism) and Kuek Yi Hsing (Baha'i faith) – gathering to bless the track ahead of a Formula One race this month. Religious groups help to build social resilience in the form of inter-religious relationships developed during "peace time", when threats are not imminent. PHOTO: SINGAPORE GP