Picture credit: AdobeStock

LET US PRAY

Sukrit Varma, **Valerie Lapteva** and **Eugenia Marina** *investigate how facial recognition technology provides reassurance in places of worship*

In a world where places of worship serve as the beating heart of communities, their significance cannot be overstated. Regardless of the religion being celebrated, sacred spaces are the very basics of spiritual worship and practice. The sacred spaces create unity, offer comfort and also assert the customs for followers. From mosques to churches, temples to synagogues, the security of these places becomes the top priority; it is the fundamental necessity of religious freedoms for fostering communal tranquillity. Hence, this makes it absolutely necessary to manage the complexities of those places of worship so that people are able to worship or just express their spirituality freely without any fear or trepidation.

From cases of vandalism, robbery, religious hate crimes to terrorist attacks, religious institutions worldwide have seen a wide variety of security threats. Such hostilities not only introduce physical danger to the spiritual seekers, but they also disrupt and render such spaces devoid of the peace and harmony they are designed to maintain. One of the potential answers to the problems of security and being able to worship safely comes in the shape of facial recognition technology. By adopting the power of sophisticated algorithms and biometric analysis, the technology brings the possibility of augmenting security measures in a way that would not lead to interferences that might violate the sanctity of the such environments. It has to be appreciated how technology can actually help to create a more peaceful environment within these holy places when it is applied skilfully and responsibly.

In the past few years, faith communities have been at the intersection of issues that pose a myriad of silting factors that undermine the security and sanctity of these holy places. From cities to the countryside, every religious institution of any denomination, ranging in size and followers, is being traumatised by the simultaneous occurrence of security incidents which supersede geographical boundaries and, instead, transcend religious affiliations.

Occurrences such as destruction of symbols of religion, property and desecrating sacred places leaves worshippers feeling victimised and offended. Likewise, thefts, which target precious religious symbols, artistic pieces or money that has been donated for charity, offer criminals not only material gains, but also — importantly — they affect the trust and goodwill within society.

Globally, trespassing is the main issue that affects temples and gurudwaras. Hinduism also faces issues with burglary, theft, and robbery while Sikhism encounters a significant number of verbal attacks and/or harassment.

However, burglary, theft, and robbery collectively account for crimes in churches, slightly higher than vandalism. In contrast, Islamic institutions face a higher incidence of burglary.

Besides these biased crimes that have been happening within or against religious institutions, the most horrifying are those with an anti-religion slant. Such cruel incidents, the product of prejudice, exclusion and radicalism have cost lives, brought about widespread anxiety and a tangible feeling of uncertainty among worshippers. These attacks are purported by different religious, racial or ideological factors regardless of the place of worship. They are a great threat to religious tolerance and eventually strike at the peace and tranquillity that worshippers seek within their sacred places.

In the Asia-Pacific region, 27 of 50 countries (54 percent) saw religion-related property attacks, while in the Americas, 15 of 35 countries (43 percent) experienced property damage incidents. In the Middle East and North Africa, properties were targeted in 12 of 20 countries (60 percent). These sobering statistics emphasise the urgent need for concerted efforts to uphold and protect religious freedoms worldwide.

During times like religious holidays or special events when overcrowding is commonplace, handling a considerable number of people within a limited space can be difficult. Overcrowding is the cause of the majority of accidents, such as stampedes or falling during pushing and shoving between worshippers. Emotions may become heated, disagreements happen, people argue over sits where or who is standing, and these arguments sometimes end up being the cause of hard feelings and disputes that tend to disturb what is supposed to be a peaceful atmosphere.

Political instability and conflicts have both an added dimension of complexity which reflects even more so in regions where tensions intersect with political turmoil. Places of worship situated at such locations are more vulnerable to security constraints like targeted violence, forced shutdowns and various restrictions from the government. In addition, the violence associated with civil disorder increases another dimension of the insecurity of places of worship. While protests and riots are somewhat expected, in most cases their occurrence is unpredictable and can lead to a disturbance or, worse, chaotic situations.

Where a sense of safety is lacking, there is clearly a need for greater security to protect places of worship and worshippers who overwhelmingly would like to see a range of physical solutions. This includes a strategic deployment of an advanced video management system, which serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it provides extensive surveillance of access points, enhancing situational awareness and threat detection. Secondly, with its capability to capture incidents discreetly, including physical attacks and verbal abuse, the video management system becomes an indispensable tool in preserving the sanctity of these sacred spaces while addressing security concerns.

THERE'S AN URGENT NEED FOR CONCERTED EFFORTS TO UPHOLD AND PROTECT RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS

Nevertheless, the use of facial recognition systems ushers in the inventive surveillance and, to some extent, invasiveness of privacy. The utilisation of such advanced technologies not only enables existing video management systems to know what has been happening, but also puts the identification of persons of interest in a place of prominence, developing the capacity to preempt and deal with any law and order issues. Consequently, the responsiveness of the authorities in this matter is very important in the matter of keeping and guaranteeing the sacredness of these sanctuaries and in improving the general emotional condition of the believers.

In addition to numerous religious institutions, facial recognition technology is now used to ensure security and safety of worshippers. The reasons for implementing the technology may be different but generally involve the worries about increasing insecurity which could manifest as vandalism, theft or may even be a terror act targeting sacred places.

In Singapore, the alarming surge of 11 police reports regarding thefts at places of worship during the first half of 2023, doubling from the previous year, underscores a pressing need for enhanced security measures. Integrating such technology offers a potent solution for securing donation boxes at places of worship, providing an extra layer of protection for these sacred spaces. By integrating facial recognition systems, these institutions can ensure that only authorised personnel have access to the donation box area, thereby minimising the risk of theft or tampering.

Facial recognition systems tailored for use in places of worship boast specific features and capabilities, such as real-time monitoring of entry points, automated identification of suspicious individuals, and integration with existing security infrastructure. This way of implementing a security system in a religious community not only provides the means for enhancing security, but also allows for preserving the holiness and its openness of places of worship.

Facial recognition systems can be applied as an important tool for resolving the crowd problem and processing civil unrest in such places. The authorities can identify hot spots for crowds and predict events that might lead to blockage or congestion with the help of facial recognition systems which provide instantaneous monitoring of crowd flows and crowd densities. Furthermore, these systems have the potential to point out those people most likely to incite violence or cause unrest. This creates an opportunity for targeted interventions, resulting in tension de-escalations and order-restoration.

FACIAL RECOGNITION CAN PREEMPT AND DEAL WITH ANY POTENTIAL LAW AND ORDER ISSUES

Notably, facial recognition technology can also help officers track the path on which individuals in civil disobedience move, identifying and apprehending suspects who cannot stop themselves from breaking into public stores or other criminal acts, ensuring the safety and well-being of worshippers during times of overcrowding and civil unrest.

When all aspects of security seem too big a threat to be overlooked, the combination of facial recognition technology systems with the perimeter intrusion detection can be an incredibly powerful solution. Especially considering such places have transformed into historical landmarks or tourist sites, the conservation strategy offers a sturdy defence against such human activities as well. Imagine this: as an individual approaches the perimeter, the cameras with the facial recognition systems record the face in the blink of an eye. In seconds, the system calculates a matching score and does a global comparison against the database of registered faces to see whether the individual is permitted to be inside. If the system detects an unauthorised presence doing so will send a signal, alerting security personnel or whatever predetermined responses deemed suitable such as alarm activation. Not only does this fusion of technologies make threat identification more exact, but also provides proper and available responses in a short time that guarantee the security and the sanctity of these sacred areas.

Physical security solutions are essential in enabling regular users of places of worship to feel safe, but the aesthetic considerations of such measures are equally important: while on-site security design must serve to keep trespassers out and help prevent crime, it should also be welcoming and instil a sense of ease. There is a fine balance to be struck between effective security and aesthetics.

By fostering ongoing evaluation, community engagement and ethical reflection, religious institutions can harness the potential of facial recognition technology to create safer and more welcoming spaces for worshippers. The objective in the end is to seek the balance between security requirements and the values of an open and inclusive system of the practice of the religion where individual rights are truly respected. Joint efforts and smart decision-making, however, guarantee the technology to be utilised as a tool of divine harmony and spiritual nurturing during worship ●

Sukrit Varma is Global Marketing Partner, APAC & MENA Region at RecFaces.
Valerie Lapteva is Business Development Director, APAC Region, at RecFaces.
Eugenia Marina is Business Development Director, MENA Region, at RecFaces.

Facial recognition systems tailored for use in places of worship boast specific features and capabilities that can integrate with existing security infrastructure

Picture credit: AdobeStock