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## **By killing a priest in France, terrorists have clearly stated they're waging a war on Western religion**

By Rex Murphy

**If religion doesn't play a part in a holy war, I don't know what does.**

What was last week's Islamist horror? Was it when a gunman lured people to a McDonald's in Munich, Germany, and opened fire on children? Was that before or after the self-proclaimed jihadist ran a truck through a crowd of revellers in Nice, France? There are so many of these nowadays, it's getting difficult to keep the timeline straight.

There was that axe attack on a train. Was that between Nice and Munich? I'm pretty sure all these were after the horrific butchery that left 49 people dead and scores wounded at a gay nightclub in Florida, but the attacks come with such speed, it's difficult to keep track. We need a terror spreadsheet.

Oh ya, there was also that "small" attack on an old French priest at the church near Rouen, Normandy, France. Considering the sadistic extravagances of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant on the battlefield, and considering the long-running persecution of Christians in the Middle East, how could so "limited" an atrocity as slitting the throat of an 84-year-old priest, while he was celebrating Mass in his church, be expected to claim the eyes and ears of a terror-tormented world? For one, the butchers made him kneel in front of his own altar to receive the knife across his throat.

Why should we expect more than the usual stale, increasingly rote and empty bleats of concern and boilerplate drones of solidarity from governments and diplomats, given that this attack was, by any objective measure, much smaller than many of the other horrors we have witnessed as of late? Well, the killing of Fr. Jacques Hamel is, or should be, different, as it comes with a concentrated aura of symbolism. A priest in a church is a sacred presence on sacred ground. This was meant to be a deed that speaks louder than words.

Jihadists have always had an eye for the symbolic, as symbolism amplifies the deed. Certainly their leadership have displayed a perverted genius for melding grisly actions and gruesome symbolism. The 9/11 attacks were arguably more symbol than deed. The targets that day were the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and (the one that failed) the White House, which represented the wealth, strength and the centre of power of the United States.

A priest is not a building. But every priest is a symbol, both of his church, in this case Catholic, and of Christianity itself. A priest at Mass is symbolism magnified. The butchery of this long-serving and highly regarded priest was meant to say, as an article in the Catholic Herald reminds us, "that Christianity in itself is among the most hated of all the targets of Islamic terrorist groups." And if our Kardashian world were not so self-obsessed, it might have understood long ago that Christians in the Middle East have been under siege for some time. In Baghdad, in 2010, the same article noted, a priest and 58 parishioners were killed by al-Qaida fanatics who declared war "on churches as 'dirty dens of idolatry' and the Pope as 'the hallucinating tyrant of the Vatican.' "

A secular West mainly regards jihadism as an attack on modernity, as a primitive hatred for progressive ideals and liberated lifestyles. That's true. But it is just as much a revulsion against the roots of our Western ways - the Christian stream of thought and practice that has always centred on the idea of the dignity of the individual and the integrity of every human life. We may have forgotten those roots, but the murder of Fr. Hamel, and the manner and place of his murder, should tell us that the jihadists have not.

How long must our leaders, from the White House to the Vatican, blindly argue that Islamists are not who they themselves say they are?

After the attack, Pope Francis was willing to say that this is "war," but very much declined to say that religion itself was an element of this war: "we don't have to be afraid to say this (is) a war of interests, for money, resources." And to make his point explicit, he continued: "I am not speaking of a war of religions. Religions don't want war."

Those words are very much to be regretted. After all, these are self-professed jihadists. If religion doesn't play a part in a holy war, I don't know what does. How

long will it take the leadership in the West to recognize this? How long must our leaders, from the White House to the Vatican, blindly argue that Islamists are not who they themselves say they are; that their motives are not what they declare their motives to be? This is not turning the other cheek. It is shutting their eyes and ears.

The murder of Fr. Hamel was as much a proclamation as a crime, and to deny its symbolism is not a mercy, it is an evasion of declared reality.

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