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Not a Religious War: Reacting to Killing of French Catholic Priest

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

The killing of a French priest in a church in France seems to mark an escalation of ISIS/Daesh's campaign in the West. It may lead to a dangerous narrative of a religious war which would play into extremist narratives on both sides. What is needed is a response which underlines how this is antithetical to Islam and a continuation of the Church's voice in speaking up for immigrants and Muslims.

Commentary

THE KILLING of an elderly French priest in his church while saying mass may mark the beginning of a dangerous new stage in ISIS/Daesh's assault. Certainly, the targeting of other religions, including Christianity, is not new for it has occurred in the Middle East and elsewhere for some time by ISIS/Daesh and other militant groups acting in the name of Islam. However, for Western nations this targeting of a priest will certainly appear to signal a specific escalation of potential targets.

It also raises the danger of portraying the situation as a war of religions, or clash of civilisations, and harming relations between the religious communities. Considering that, between them, Muslims and Christians count for over half the globe's population, with numbers of both expected to rise as an overall proportion by 2050, any breakdown in relations could have dramatic effects. Responses to this attack must therefore highlight that we are not seeing a war of religion taking place.

Not an Islamic Act

A first response must be to make it known that this attack is deeply anti-Islamic. Stretching back to the earliest days of Islam, priests and other religious personnel

were considered sacrosanct. Even in times of war they were amongst the categories of people that could not be killed. Moreover, considering the example of Muhammad, which Muslims are expected to follow, his often generous and kind treatment of Christians stands in marked contrast to this brutality.

The attack, therefore, does not stand in line with Islamic tradition, and Christians and others must understand that Muslims will be as aghast as they are by what has happened. It must not be taken to stand for Islam. Therefore, Muslims, Christians and others must stand together in saying that this attack does not represent religion as they understand it.

Migrants, Civilisation Clashes, and Narratives

We need to be aware that this event will play into current discussions about immigration and the rights and place of Muslims in the Western world. Some nationalist right-wing extremists have tried to paint a picture of a Christian Europe standing against an Islamic threat. However, such groups and reactions have generally gone against the teachings and attitudes of Europe's churches. Across Europe it has often been bishops who have been amongst the voices calling for toleration and to allow more immigrants in and to show them compassion.

It is likely though that those who are opposed to Islam and immigration will seek to use this as propaganda to instil fear and hatred. The danger of polarised narratives is real: Christians against Muslims; and Christian love and civilisation against Islamic hatred and barbarity. As such, spreading the message above as a first response is imperative. Governments, media, and both Christian and Muslim religious leaders need to lead the way in showing that we do not see, in Samuel Huntington's famous words, a clash of civilisations.

Christian Responses

Equally, we must ensure that church leaders are not shown as being naïve in having supported Muslim immigrants coming to Europe. Some may suggest that this is the outcome of what they may see as a weak attitude of Christian love that has not understood the situation.

Indeed, Christian leaders, including the priesthood, may perceive themselves as directly under threat and react by saying that there are limits to Christian love, or seek to assert some imagined borders of "Christendom" that protects those inside and keeps others out. It is imperative that Christian leaders remain at the forefront of speaking up for immigrants and also explaining that such attacks are not based upon Islam and should not put a limit to hospitality to others.

Political and Public Narratives

Like many recent terrorist attacks this is on what are termed soft targets - public spaces which are not easily defended. As many churches and priests are part of the local communities it would be impossible to provide protection for them across Western nations. It may also seem an existential attack on the fabric of the society.

France's President Hollande has said of the attack: "To attack a church, to kill a priest, is to profane the republic."

His response suggests that this attack is seen as a profound attack on the way of life, culture, and civilisation of France. However, we must not allow this to be portrayed as a religious war, a battle between Islam and Christianity. As noted above it is antithetical to both religions. Muslims and Christians need to stand united against it.

However, this voice needs to be reported in the media and undergirded by the government and others whose voices can bring this to the wider public. The danger of radicals on both sides using this to portray a religious war is very real and could lead to an escalation of hostilities, suspicion, and fear.

We should heed the views of religious leaders such as Cardinal Andre Vingt-Trois, the Archbishop of Paris, who declared "Daesh....wants to set the children of the same family against each other," and Dr Fatris Bakaram, the Mufti of Singapore, who spoke of those who "abuse religion for their own violent and supremacist conduct" and calling for "a united front in rejecting violence in all its manifestation".

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