

Recent arsons targeting churches in Europe

By Willy Fautré, Director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (21.08.2019) - Mainline media often report about destruction of places of worship in the framework of military conflicts or clashes between (ethno-)religious communities. Arsons targeting religious places in Europe do occur as well but are un- or underreported. Along with various other forms of acts of vandalism, they usually remain unnoticed, outside the radar and un-analyzed by researchers and scholars because they are only published in local media and not in English. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency should pay special attention to these incidents.

Here are a few cases that occurred this year in EU member states:

Finland

Suspected arson at Hyvinkää church: a storage facility at the Old Church was destroyed before firefighters were able to get the blaze under control

Yle Uutiset (19.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Zc3Dtn> - Police suspect that a fire at the Old Church in the centre of Hyvinkää, a municipality located about 50 kilometres north of Helsinki, was started deliberately.

"Based on our preliminary investigation, there is reason to suspect that the fire was intentionally ignited," said Crime Commissioner **Leif Malmberg** of the Eastern Uusimaa Police Department. "The case is currently being investigated as an act of arson."

Malmberg added that as the investigation is currently ongoing, the police cannot yet provide any further details, but that no natural cause for the fire was found.

"This was based on a technical investigation which has given us reason to suspect that the fire was intentionally started. There are no suspects at this stage," Malmberg said.

The police have asked for the public's assistance in investigating the incident.

Passerby raised alarm

At approximately 2.30am on Friday, a passerby noticed a fire in a storage building behind the church and alerted authorities.

When the Central Uusimaa Rescue Service arrived, the 30-square-metre warehouse was fully aflame. The storage unit contained gardening tools and supplies, said on-duty firefighter **Harry Häyrinen**, and the warehouse and all of the supplies were completely destroyed by the fire.

A blaze was also noticed to have started in the window frame of a 19th century log building, but firefighters were able to extinguish it before it spread.

"The window was open, and there was hemp being used as insulation. Some smoke had got in, but it has now been ventilated," Häyrinen explained.

The warehouse is about 15 metres away from the Old Church, and the log building is about 25 metres away.

Häyrinen therefore believes it is unlikely that the fire at the log building would come from sparks that had flown from the storage building.

There was no reported injuries caused by the fire.

Hyvinkää Old Church is a log building originally built as a prayer room in 1896, based on the designs of renowned Finnish architect **Yrjö Sadeniemi**. The prayer room was enlarged in 1923 by master builder **Heikki Siikonen**, and the building was consecrated in 1978.

According to the Hyvinkää parish website, the Old Church is a popular location for weddings.

Other sources: [Daily Finland](#), [Helsingin Sanomat](#), [Aamuposti](#)

Read also:

[Serial arson suspect detained in Kokkola](#)

12.6.2018

[Helsinki arson suspect surrenders to police in western Finland](#)

16.12.2018

[Officials suspect arson behind Mikkeli school blaze](#)

20.6.2018

[Young man dies after falling off roof in Hyvinkää](#)

28.5.2018

France

HRWF has covered the issue of the protection of religious community buildings in France in some specific papers such as:

[70,000 law enforcement forces for the protection of places of worship at Easter](#)

[France: About the Protection of Christian Places of Worship](#)

Two suspicious fires in four days in Bourg-Achard Church

Observatory of Christianophobia (01.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2KHLJ9S> - Between 26 and 30 June, two fires were discovered in the 13th century Saint-Lô Church in Bourg-Achard (Eure). According to the police in charge of the investigation, there is a high probability that these two fires were deliberately set.

On 26 June, the first fire was discovered by the sacristan, an employee of the diocese. As he went to close the church, he realized that a fire had consumed the altar tablecloth. Lit candles had been placed on the altar in what authorities called "satanic staging with inverted crosses and jewels arranged on the altar." He managed to call for help quickly, which prevented the spread of fire.

On Sunday, June 30, four days later, the church was closed following the first fire. At the end of the afternoon, a passer-by saw smoke coming from the church steeple and alerted firefighters. Inside the church, the organ was in flames. By the time the fire was discovered, the organ had been completely destroyed.

Two fires in less than a week is at least "disturbing," said Jean-Marie Thiébault, 2nd Deputy Mayor. "It's not accidental, it's clear."

Neither he nor the Mayor have any memory of possible threats, or of an incident that would have foreshadowed reprisals against the church.

"We deplore what happened," said the Mayor who announced the installation of security cameras inside the church, paid for by the municipality. "They should be installed in one or two days. It is done to protect the communal church and to continue to receive ceremonies at the request of the parishioners and the priest."

Sources: [Paris Normandie](#), [Paris Normandie](#), [infornormandie](#)

Germany

Arson at St Magnus Church at Schussenried Abbey

Observatory of Christianophobia (29.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZiYZd4> - An unknown arsonist set fire to a cloth in the St. Magnus church of the Schussenried Abbey in Bad Schussenried on July 29th. The fire then extended to pictures and a wooden cross nearby. A witness noticed the fire and was able to extinguish it. Police are investigating. The witness describes the arsonist as a 20 to 30-year-old man with short hair and a height of about 165-170 cm. He was wearing a green T-shirt and beige colored shorts.

For information contact police in Bad Schussenried (telephone: 07583/942020).

Source: [Police press release](#)

Suspected arson in Ankum church

Observatory of Christianophobia (01.06.2019) <https://bit.ly/30jRVuZ> - The fire department in Ankum was called to a smoldering fire in the St. Nikolaus Catholic Church around noon on 1 June 2019. When the team of 33 firefighters in six firetrucks arrived, the Swedish visitors who had initially discovered the two spots of smoldering fire in the church, had already extinguished them out with water.

According to police, the church wasn't damaged by the fire and the fire department only had to inspect the site and quickly gave the all-clear. Police suspect arson and began their investigation with the help of the Swedish visitors describing two girls running out of the church just before they themselves entered and the church's surveillance video tapes.

Sources: [NOZ](#)

Vandals burn statue of Jesus in Grossholbach Church

Observatory of Christianophobia (19.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Zj5pFf> - Police reported that unknown perpetrators broke in a church window with stones and invaded the interior of the church of the Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit in Großholbach (Westerwald in Rhineland-Palatinate) during the night of May 18th to 19th. Several sacred objects, including statues of saints, were broken. The Jesus figure was removed from the crucifix and burned. The intruders also urinated in the aisle and on several pews. Mayor Michael Kohlhaas, expressed the shock of the small community: "This hurts. These are values that are simply trampled on."

Police are seeking witnesses.

Contact: Polizeiinspektion Montabaur, Telephone: 02602-9226-0

Sources: [Kath.net](#), [police press release](#), and [Rhein Zeitung](#)

Fires set in Nordhausen church

Observatory Christianophobia (18.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/30keDIN> - Police announced on May 19th that a tablecloth had been set on fire in the vestibule of St. Blasii's Evangelical church in Nordhausen during the night of 18 May. Fortunately, it did not catch fire completely. There were also traces of fire on a cordon to the church balcony. The professional fire brigade used a thermal imaging camera to scan other areas for evidence of fires. Police are now looking for witnesses who may have seen something suspicious.

Source: [Police press release](#)

United Kingdom

PSNI seeking two over Londonderry church arson

BBC (25.05.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2P7FiB8> - Police investigating an arson attack on a church in Londonderry have said they believe two males may have started the fire.

The fire happened at Holy Family Church in Ballymagroarty shortly after 22:00 BST on Friday night.

The fire service said CCTV showed the fire had been started deliberately by several youths.

Parish priest Fr Paddy O'Kane was visiting a sick man whose son showed him a photograph of the fire.

He thought at first it was "trick photography".

"I thought he was playing a joke," he said.

"I went to the front of the man's house and then I could see smoke rising. The community had gathered. I got a terrible shock."

The parochial house of the church was evacuated and 20 firefighters tackled the blaze.

Fr O'Kane said he had not been allowed back into the building while forensics officers worked on the scene.

Fr O'Kane said he could not understand the motivation of the young men behind the arson attack, but he would pray for them at weekend masses.

"I never can understand vandalism or arson, I don't understand what buzz it gives people," he said.

"I can't understand what goes on in a person's mind that they want to cause damage to other people and how it can make them feel good.

"I feel more sorry for them. There is something badly wrong in their lives whenever they do this."

Group Commander Andy Burns said it had put lives in danger and that a community event was being held in the parochial house when the blaze broke out.

He said the fire was started in a shed to the rear of the parochial house.

The house was damaged, with the heat destroying windows.

'People can lose their lives'

The fire also spread to the church roof and tiles were removed by the fire service to prevent it spreading further, he said.

The CCTV footage had been passed to police for investigation, Group Cmdr Burns added. "This was arson. This had the potential to spread to the adjoining parochial house, which was occupied, and people can lose their lives in this type of incident," he said.

"We would ask our young people, please do not get involved in setting deliberate fires, setting fires like this is very dangerous."

PSNI Det Con Fielding said: "At this stage we believe two males may have been involved in starting this fire and we are keen to identify them.

"We would like to hear from anyone who was in the area at around the time of the fire or anyone who may have information regarding this crime."

Sinn Féin councillor Michael Cooper condemned the attack: "The mindset of actually going down and deliberately setting fire to a church or any community building defies logic.

"This has caused extreme anger and disbelief in the community who go to this chapel."

SDLP councillor Shauna Cusack described it as a "reckless act".

"I don't know what they were trying to achieve - it put people at risk.

"It also put the fire service at risk too. I really can't understand the mindset of people who would want to destroy a place of worship and somebody's home."