

Right-wing extremist or Christian terrorist?

by [David Gibson](#) in the [Aug 23, 2011](#) issue

The mass murders in Oslo have raised a host of agonizing questions, but few have such an ancient lineage and contemporary resonance as whether Anders Behring Breivik, the right-wing extremist behind the attacks that killed 76 Norwegians on July 22, is a Christian.

Breivik has claimed in various forums that he is a Christian but most explicitly and in greatest detail in the 1,500-page manifesto he compiled over several months and posted on the Internet.

"At the age of 15 I chose to be baptized and confirmed in the Norwegian State Church," the 32-year-old Breivik wrote. "I consider myself to be 100 percent Christian." But he also fiercely disagrees with the politics of most Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

"Regarding my personal relationship with God, I guess I'm not an excessively religious man," he writes. "I am first and foremost a man of logic. However, I am a supporter of a monocultural Christian Europe."

Breivik fashions himself a "cultural Christian" and a modern-day crusader in a resurrected order of the medieval Knights Templar, riding out to do battle against squishy "multiculturalism" and the onslaught of "Islamization"—and to suffer the glory of Christian martyrdom in the process.

Mark Juergensmeyer, author of *Terror in the Mind of God*, noted close parallels between Breivik and Timothy McVeigh, the antigovernment radical behind the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. "If [Osama] bin Laden is a Muslim terrorist, Breivik and McVeigh are surely Christian ones," Juergensmeyer, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, wrote on the blog Religion Dispatches.

Not surprisingly, conservative pundits who share some of Breivik's views and also consider themselves Christians quickly sought to distance themselves from Breivik by declaring, as Bill O'Reilly did on Fox News, that "Breivik is not a Christian."

"That's impossible," O'Reilly said July 26. "No one believing in Jesus commits mass murder. The man might have called himself a Christian on the Net, but he is certainly not of that faith." O'Reilly blamed the "liberal media" for "pushing the Christian angle" in order to demean Christians like himself.

O'Reilly's point was taken up by any number of commentators and religion scholars.

Mathew N. Schmalz, a professor of religious studies at the College of the Holy Cross, wrote in a *Washington Post* column that Breivik's vision "is a Christianity without Christ" because the attacker rejects a personal relationship with Jesus.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Andrew Brown reasoned that "even in his saner moments [Breivik's] ideology had nothing to do with Christianity but was based on an atavistic horror of Muslims and a loathing of 'Marxists,' by which he meant anyone to the left of Genghis Khan."

Arne H. Fjeldstad, a longtime Norwegian journalist and Lutheran minister of the Church of Norway, wrote a lengthy analysis of Breivik's references to Christianity and also concluded that "his view is framed entirely by politics, with strong political and cultural opinions, which also include religious views." Fjeldstad added: "Breivik's religious position is rather distant from any Christian faith commitment."

Others pushed back against such a carefully cordoned-off interpretation of Breivik's faith, or of Christianity itself. "If he did what he has alleged to have done, Anders Breivik is a Christian terrorist," Boston University religion scholar Stephen Prothero wrote on CNN.com.

"Yes, he twisted the Christian tradition in directions most Christians would not countenance. But he rooted his hate and his terrorism in Christian thought and Christian history, particularly the history of the medieval Crusades against Muslims, and current efforts to renew that clash," said Prothero. "So Christians have a responsibility to speak out forcefully against him, and to look hard at the resources in the Christian tradition that can be used to such murderous ends."

Popular blogger Andrew Sullivan, a Catholic, also expounded on that point, writing that "it is obvious that Christians can commit murder, assault, etc. They do so every day. Because, as Christian orthodoxy tells us, we are all sinners.

"To say that no Christian can ever commit murder is a sophist's piffle. . . . Do the countless criminals who have gone to church or believe in Jesus immediately not count as Christians the minute they commit the crime? Of course not."

Sullivan said O'Reilly's argument "is complete heresy in terms of the most basic Christian orthodoxy." And Sullivan is right, though for some 2,000 years Christians have continually battled fiercely over who is a "real" Christian and who is not, or who is a "good" Christian and who is a "bad" Christian.

Many argue today that President Obama, for example, can't be a true Christian despite his profession of faith because of the liberal policies he proposes. Or that Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, a Tea Party favorite, can't be a real Catholic because he embraces the atheistic libertarianism of Ayn Rand in opposition to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Anders Breivik may be a bad Christian, perhaps the worst one can imagine, as well as a confused man who cherry-picked from scripture and history to justify his unchristian form of Christianity. But countless numbers of religion experts have observed that proof-texting the Bible and using faith to rationalize one's favorite political and cultural views is something that most believers—Jewish, Muslim and Christian—are guilty of at one time or another. So kicking Breivik out of Christianity in the end might be an ominous sign for all Christians. —RNS