

#1

Q: Can Christians be terrorists?

A: Journalists and others have applied different labels to Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian terrorist. The *New York Times* and other news outlets called him a Christian extremist or fundamentalist. Others have suggested labels like insane, right-wing extremist or anti-Islamic fanatic.

The answer to his identity is found in his rambling 1,500 page “manifesto.” It will take a while to sort through it all; but already we know that he embraced European and American anti-Islamist or Islamic websites that view Muslim immigration to the West as part of a plot to replace Christian civilization with Shari’a Law.

He also claimed to be a Christian committed to restoring Christian Europe. This is what all the arguing is about. So far people are citing different quotes to either prove or disprove his Christian credentials.

Stephen Prothero of Boston University points to Breivik’s claim that he is “100% Christian” and the “savior . . . of European Christendom.” He expects a new crusade and identifies with the Knights Templar, the medieval monastic military order founded to protect Christians from Muslims. He quotes extensively from the Old and New Testaments to justify violent self-defense and predicts a wave of future Christian martyrs who will save Europe from Islam.

In his column “On Religion,” journalist Terry Mattingly shows the inherent contradictions in Breivik’s religious biography. He was baptized and confirmed in the Church of Norway at 15; but does not now attend church, show any knowledge of Christian teachings or theology, or pray. He is much more interested in attacking Islam, cultural Marxism, political correctness, multiculturalism, secularism, academia, and feminism than promoting Christianity as a religious faith.

Here is how Breivik defines himself in his manifesto:

If you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and God then you are a religious Christian. Myself and many more like me do not necessarily have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and God. We do however believe in Christianity as a cultural, social, identity and moral platform. This makes us Christian. . . .

So, no, you don’t need to have a personal relationship with God or Jesus to fight for our Christian cultural heritage. It is enough that you are a Christian-agnostic or a Christian-

atheist.

Needless to say, “religious Christians” view such Culture Christianity as no Christianity at all. Whatever pundits mean by “Christian fundamentalism,” it cannot be equated with “Christian agnosticism” or “Christian atheism.”

But do so-called religious Christians ever resort to terror to advance their Christian cause?

When I taught church history to seminary students, many insisted that “real Christians” (=“religious Christians”?) were not responsible for launching the Crusades, beheading their enemies, burning heretics and witches, or using torture to stop the spread of heresy because true followers of Jesus would never engage in such behavior.

Bill O’Reilly on Fox recently expressed the same view: Breivik “is not a Christian. That’s impossible. 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.” He pointed out that Breivik belonged to no church and did not practice Christianity in any way. He just used Christianity for his own purposes.

My students and O’Reilly do have a point. We would like to think that we can distinguish between people who claim to be a Christian and those who actually live like one.

But historians occupy a much more complicated world in which “religious Christians” have often used violence to protect “Christian culture.” The history of Christianity is replete with people who “name the name” of Jesus but use the Bible and the Christian tradition to promote nationalism, racism, or some other ideology. Some people twist Christianity on purpose (the Nazis come to mind), while others seem clueless about what they are doing. That’s what I wanted my students to think about: given the right circumstances, even professing and practicing Christians can delude themselves into doing unspeakable things.

Or is Christianity the only world religion without committed extremists who use religion to justify evil behavior?

Crusaders fought in the Middle East in order to save their souls. Because “God wills it,” they were willing to kill and be killed for Jesus. They said they fought in self-defense, but showed Muslims a thing or two about how to wage “holy war.”

To save Christian Europe from division and decline in the Middle Ages, prominent theologians and spiritual leaders justified torturing and burning heretics in the Inquisition after giving them ample time to recant. God expected Christian leaders to deal decisively with threats to church and society. To preserve Christendom, tough times required tough measures.

Here’s a question for American Christians: *were there any “real Christians” in the Ku Klux Klan?* The Klan sought to preserve white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian (i.e., Protestant) America by intimidating, beating, burning, and lynching Black Christians. It recruited

God-fearing white Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and other Protestants.

In the mid-1990s I asked seminary students in Louisville if any real Christians joined the Klan. Some of them struggled with the question because it implicated their fathers, grandfathers, and church members in good standing. One student-pastor from western Kentucky confided that half of his deacons were Klansmen. Could *they* possibly be Christians?

When I told a faculty colleague about that class discussion, he recounted a story from when he was pastor of a Baptist church in eastern Kentucky in the late 1960s. After he preached a couple of sermons on racial justice, an old woman showed him a picture of the church's interior taken in the 1920s. Standing behind the rows of Sunday school children were hooded Klansmen. A large banner above their heads read "Welcome to Klan Sunday."

Without such support from faithful church-goers, the Klan would not have flourished in the Bible-Belt.

In other words, self-identified Christians often act like the Devil. When that happens, it is up to the followers of Jesus to speak out against their behavior, repudiate their ideas, and distance themselves from such folks. Evidently Breivik did not participate in the Christian community in Norway; but he slaughtered his countrymen to make a statement about saving Christian Europe, thereby defaming Christians everywhere.

There are good Christians and bad, devoted followers of Jesus and cynical pretenders. Most of the time believers think they can tell the difference; but only God knows for sure. Those who seek to follow Jesus would do well to remember his words: "by their fruit you shall know them," then make sure that their own behavior measures up.

#2

Q: How Christian is Norway?

A: Since the terror attacks in Norway, we are learning more about that nation's religious make-up. But evaluating Norway's state-church system is difficult: while membership in the Church of Norway is high, levels of church attendance and traditional Christian beliefs and practices are low.

By the end of the 12th Norway was essentially evangelized, thanks to the efforts of Anglo-Saxon missionaries and the conversion of King Olaf II. In the 1530s King Christian III of Denmark and Norway broke with the Roman Catholic Church and aligned with the Protestant Reformation. For three centuries the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway had a religious monopoly: membership and attendance were mandatory; and all other religious groups, including Jews and Catholics, were banned.

That situation changed in the 1840s, when an intense pietistic revival led to the founding of "free churches" and the lifting of laws against Catholics and Jews. In 1964 a constitutional amendment granted freedom of religion to everyone except the Norwegian royal family, which is required by law to belong to the Church of Norway. Also at least half the members of the *Storting*, the national assembly, must belong to the state church.

But freedom of religion does not mean the separation of church and state. The Church of Norway is headed by the King of Norway. The Royal Ministry of Cultural and Church Affairs oversees Church administration; and the *Storting* is responsible for all Church-related legislation and budgets. Bishops are appointed by the state; and all clergy salaries and pensions are paid out of the state treasury.

The Church of Norway manages its own religious affairs through the General Synod; and local dioceses make most clergy assignments. The state church is also responsible for religious education in the public schools, though it recently adjusted course content to include more religious diversity, including Islam.

The state church is funded through general taxes and receives a fixed amount per member. If people register as a member of another religious group, the government pays it the same amount per capita, which means that even Muslims receive state financial support.

About 80% of Norway's population of 4.8 million belongs to the Church of Norway. Children born to at least one Norwegian parent are automatically enrolled in the state church. About seven in ten are baptized and become "members." Unbaptized children are listed as "belonging" to the state church until they are 18, when they are removed from

church rolls.

Another 5% of the population belongs to some other Christian group, while about 2.5% aligns with non-Christian religions. Secular humanists comprise 1.7%; and the unaffiliated 13%.

Church attendance is among the lowest in Europe: only 3-5% of the total population is in church on an average Sunday; and only 10% attend at least once a month. Consequently, most members connect with the Church of Norway only at baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funerals.

Despite high church membership, like the rest of Europe, Norway has become increasingly secular. In a 2005 Eurobarometer Poll, only 32% said they “believe there is a God,” 47% “believe there is some sort of spirit or life force,” 17% “do not believe there is any sort of spirit, God, or life force,” and 4% “do not know.”

Not surprisingly, a 2007 Gallup Poll found that only 22% said that “religion occupies an important place” in their lives.

What does all this add up to? Some argue that since the Church of Norway is so imbedded in national life, Christian values prevail, even if Christian practices do not. Thus Christianity exists primarily as a culture-shaping force that undergirds Norwegian social and political life.

Others point to the low levels of participation and belief as proof that the nation’s Christian heritage is in trouble, leaving a vacuum that more aggressive religions and ideologies will attempt to fill.

Islam is now only 2% of Norway’s total population, which is hardly a critical mass for exerting influence. But critics charge that it already has received special privileges and protections that disadvantage the Christian majority. In addition, many people fear that high birthrates, increasing immigration, and its religious intensity will someday challenge the state-church system in which religious indifference and secularism are on the rise.

Breivik did not attack mosques or Norway’s Muslim population. His terror was directed against elements in the “Christian culture” that had become so committed to religious tolerance and multiculturalism that it could not protect itself against the Muslim threat.

Philip Jenkins of Pennsylvania State University has addressed these and other issues in [*God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis*](#) (2007). His study is a comprehensive and realistic view of the clash between secularism, Islam, and Christianity. Though many people fear the loss of Europe’s Christian heritage because of surging Islam, Jenkins suggests another possible outcome of the current crisis:

“As European states redefine their attitudes to [Islam], they have no choice but to take

account of the far more numerous presence of Christianity. From a grassroots level too, the immense attention paid to religious concerns and Europe's heritage in the past few years probably will drive more Europeans to take a renewed interest in their Christian roots As mainstream Europeans rethink the religious roots of their society, some at least will be led to take that religious dimension more seriously. . . . Nothing drives activists and reformers more powerfully than the sense that their faith is about to perish in their homelands and that they urgently need to make up these losses father afield, whether overseas or among the previously neglected lost sheep at home" (pp. 287-288).

How Norway's state-church system will respond to the current crisis remains to be seen.

#3

Q: Do the religious views of presidential candidates matter?

A: According to a [poll](#) published last week by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Religion News Service, Americans favor candidates with strong religious views, but they are not sure what specific candidates believe and do not insist that the candidates' views be the same as theirs.

Here is a summary of the poll's major findings:

A majority of Americans (56%) believe that it is somewhat or very important for presidential candidates to have strong religious beliefs, even if those beliefs differ from their own.

Here is the breakdown of those who answered this way:

Political groups:

- 72% the Tea Party
- 71% Republicans
- 51% Democrats

Religious groups:

- 74% ethnic minority Christians
- 73% white evangelicals
- 57% white mainline Protestants
- 57% Roman Catholics

Many Americans are still uncertain about the religious identities of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Here is how those polled identified these two candidates:

Barack Obama:

- 38% Christian
- 18% Muslim
- 40% Don't know

Mitt Romney:

- 11% Christian
- 40% Mormon
- 46% Don't know

When asked whether candidates' religious views were very similar, somewhat similar, somewhat different or very different than their own religious beliefs, here is how they answered:

Barack Obama:

- 30% Very or somewhat similar
- 48% Very or somewhat different
- 20% Don't know his religious beliefs
- 2% Refused to answer

Mitt Romney:

- 22% Very or somewhat similar
- 43% Very or somewhat different
- 31% Don't know his religious beliefs
- 3% Never heard of him
- 1% Refused to answer

Michele Bachmann:

- 24% Very or somewhat similar
- 31% Very or somewhat different
- 38% Don't know her religious beliefs
- 5% Never heard of her
- 2% Refused to answer

Analysts have found much to ponder in the poll, especially when they examine how different groups responded.

For example, only 21% of ethnic minority Christians knows that Romney is a Mormon in comparison to 44% of white evangelicals, 80% of whom say that Mormonism is very different from their own beliefs.

According to Daniel Cox of the Public Religion Research Institute, because so many Americans believe that Mormon teachings are substantially different from their own, "Romney will need to address these perceptions as Americans learn more about him during the campaign."

Gary Scott Smith, an expert on religion and the presidency from Grove City College, thinks that the prospect of defeating Obama may lead evangelicals to overlook their differences with Mormonism. "And if they don't recognize that Romney's a Mormon by now, then you wonder how attuned they are to politics anyway."

Even though Michele Bachmann self-identifies as an evangelical and seeks support from that community, 51% of them says they do not know what she believes, and only 35% says

she shares their religious views. She clearly has more work to do.

Mark Silk of Trinity College in Connecticut thinks that Bachmann can improve her appeal to evangelicals by saying more about her religious convictions, while Romney may gain ground among undecided votes by downplaying his Mormonism.

Religion is bound to make a difference in the upcoming election, though it is not yet clear how the candidates will play their religious trump cards.