

What Do We Do When the Terrorist Looks Like Us?

Recently, many followed the story of a gunman who massacred participants at a Norwegian youth camp and bombed government buildings in Oslo. News pundits quickly speculated about which Islamic terrorist group was behind these actions. Eventually, we learned that Anders Breivik, a Norwegian citizen who self-identifies as a Christian and an avid reader of several American anti-Islamic bloggers, was the person responsible for the killing. Both the authors of the blogs and Christians sought distance from Breivik. One pundit has gone so far as to say that the portrayal of Breivik as a Christian is little more than “left-wing media anti-Christian bias.”

Behind all of this distancing, perhaps what was most daunting was to see a “terrorist” that looked a lot like . . . some of us. My family immigrated to this country from Norway and settled North of Pullman in 1934. I look at Breivik’s image and realize that, by appearance, he could fit in at a Zakarison family reunion. As a Christian pastor, I chafe at the idea that Breivik connects his anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim hatred with “my” faith. He identifies himself as a Christian and writes that he is a “supporter of a mono-cultural Christian Europe,” rooting the rationalization for his terrorism in Christian thought and history. He opines that his own beliefs have been fueled by a Christian hatred of Muslims traced back to the Crusades.

As a Christian, a person of Norwegian heritage, as a human being, I want to claim that this guy was, at best, deeply disturbed – to distance myself from him as much as possible. And yet, I have a fear that, if the perpetrator had been Muslim, that many Christians would not have allowed such distance for our neighbors. I fear that there would have been an outcry against all Muslims and Islam itself. There is a teachable moment here. If things had been different, would we have allowed those in our community who live, work, and attend school with us, and, yes, are also Muslim, to have distance from behavior that they find appalling, or would we have somehow held them responsible for the actions of another?

A brief reality check: Recently, the Gallup Association completed the largest poll of Muslims ever taken to find out what Muslims think and believe on a variety of issues. The study took place over 6 years, in 35 countries. Over 50,000 Muslims were interviewed. Among their findings was that, while American media represents Muslims through militant images 57 percent of the time, the number of Muslims polled who subscribe to “radical thinking” represents only seven percent. The vast majority of Muslims felt that extremist attacks are unjustifiable. And another: In her most recent work, Middle Eastern reporter Robin Wright finds that the values expressed through the unrest of the so-called “Arab Spring” reflect a generation of young adults who feel a disconnect from extremist groups in their own countries. They seek peaceful change through demonstrations, the tools of social media, a focus on women’s rights, protest through forms of creative expression such as hip hop and film, and working toward democratic principles of freedom of speech, vote, and human rights.

I challenge all of us who profess to follow a specific religion or a set of moral principles that espouse values of justice, peace, and love, to speak out when others spew hateful rhetoric in “our” name. We must hold one another accountable when religion becomes a tool used to justify words that lead some to commit hate-filled actions. And if we feel compelled to author such words, do we not have an obligation to get to know the “other” against whom we speak? When

is the last time you visited your local Mosque, or had a conversation about everyday life with a member of our community who is Muslim? If the answer is “rarely” or “never,” it’s not too late to begin.