Graced Life After All? Terrorism and Theology on July 22, 2011

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Abstract: On the afternoon of July 22, 2011, a white Norwegian killed seventy-seven people in and around Oslo. A majority of those killed were Social Democratic youth, camping on the island of Utøya. Dressed as a Norwegian policeman, Anders Behring Breivik took the ferry over to the island and shot sixty-nine children with a pistol and a semi-automatic gun. The weapons were carved with Rune names and dedicated to Thor and Odin, the war gods in Norse mythology. About ninety minutes before the attacks, Breivik had published a 1,500-page manifesto on the Internet, urging radical nationalists in Europe to defend Christianity by fighting back Islamic migration, multiculturalism, and feminism. I propose to analyze how a new project linking “Christian and pagan” was launched through the Oslo massacres. I also make a distinction between the sacrificial aspects of a bloody massacre, and the non-bloody acts of love that manifested among surviving youth at Utøya, and ask if these contrary acts express, or at least involve, two radically different ways of doing religion.

Key Terms: radical nationalism, terrorism, 22 July 2011, Norway, Anders Behring Breivik, paganism, Norse mythology, grace

Clan and State

The Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, who killed seventy-seven people on July 22, 2011, calls himself a cultural Christian and an Odinist by ethnic origin. In other words, he self-identifies in some capacity with both the terms Christian and pagan. The fact that he defines and embraces two seemingly contrary “religious” identities, although he relates them hierarchically, is of importance to theology and rather new to the twenty-first century. It is also a sign that Breivik, in his own eyes, is a fully human person who belongs to “the land of his ancestors” and its historically embedded cultural-religious high traditions of clan (past) and state (present).

The last time this double identity-claim was heard loudly in Europe—and also used to legitimize and promote the utopia of belonging to one unified social body, professing one Weltanschauung, abiding to one Führer—was during German Nazism (and Italian Fascism). The regimes were merciless in their quest for purified whiteness within bounded territorial and social space. Permitted forms of “religioning” was at the time not about generating neighbors, expanding the “houses” of kin and kindred, amplifying life and grace for the multitude, or alien justification mediated through the death (and resurrection) of a young Jewish male. It was purely about helping (or disciplining) the fully human Deutsche person and his collective to behave well according to prescribed norms and the national-socialist spirit. A person considered fully human could daily reinstate her worthiness of full
citizenship through blameless moral behavior. For persons considered *not-fully human*, high religion had in theory no function—except as a boundary marker. It did not belong to them.2

The Rise of a New Right

Because of several ideological links between Breivik’s many statements and the growth of a radical new right in Europe today—including radical nationalist, extremist, and neo-fascist movements—I offer a preliminary analysis of his acts and thinking in light of this seemingly perplexing identitarian project. Breivik’s radical ideology and composite worldview are available to us textually in his so-called manifesto. During the trial in court, his thinking was explained and elaborated a bit further. I was allowed to sit in the courthouse during the whole process. When I listened to Breivik’s narratives and heard him explain his own agency, I found the norms that explicitly guided his acts to be articulate and rather stable. Nevertheless, the ideology was hard to live by, even for him. He therefore needed comprehensive aid from the routines of disciplinary body/meditation techniques, and from a large collection of objects, including technical apparatus bought and assembled by Breivik himself, to assist him in accomplishing difficult “necessary tasks.”

A first observation is that Breivik’s terrorist design is full of sacrificial features. In this article, I give priority to the bloody sacrificial features of the massacre, and toward the end contrast them with the non-bloody acts of love that manifested among surviving young people at one of the terrorist sites. These contrary acts do, of course, entail radically different ways of doing religion and of speaking grace; or alternatively, repudiating grace as such from human experience and vocabulary.

A second observation is that Breivik obviously abuses the terms *Christian* and *Odinist* for a modernist, violent goal, and construes their associative meanings as he sees fit. His discourse negates contemporary theological conceptions, and his politicized theology is the inverse of the open and inclusive form of church that was evident and manifest in the mourning rituals in and around the cathedral of Oslo in the weeks after July 22.3 Thus, in this article I focus on the more obscure term *Odinist* by examining the larger, generic categories “pagan” and “paganism.” This will give us a better understanding of how a new/old construct of being Christian and pagan/Odinist simultaneously helped Breivik facilitate terrorist acts, and also legitimized the massacre as an unfortunate political necessity (“it had to be done”).

The Massacre

Over the course of the afternoon of July 22, 2011, the 32-year-old white male A. B. Breivik killed seventy-seven people in and around Oslo. A majority of those killed were Social Democratic youth, gathered at their annual retreat camp on the island of Utøya. Dressed in the uniform of a Norwegian policeman and carrying two heavy bags, Breivik took the small ferryboat over to the island under the pretext of reporting on the bomb attack in the government quarter in Oslo, an attack he had himself orchestrated and perpetrated. As soon as he set foot on the island, Breivik began to shoot at everything that moved. Using a semi-automatic rifle and pistol, he killed sixty-nine campers and injured thirty-three others. This all happened within seventy-two minutes. A special counter-terrorist police unit then cornered him, and he gave himself up without resistance, declaring his “mission accomplished,” presumably referring to the massacre. After the trial in spring 2012, he was sentenced to twenty-one years in prison and subsequent detention.

Six hours before the bomb blast in Oslo, Breivik had posted a ten-minute video of himself on YouTube, urging radical nationalists, extremists, and new-right activists in Europe and the United States to “embrace martyrdom” and join him in defending ethnic rights to homeland, separatism, gender hierarchy, and monoculture for white survival. The video shows him dressed as a Knight Templar, wielding a large sword, using text blurbs to call for
a return to the zeal of the early Christian crusades. In the video, he also posed with his semi-automatic gun and pistol, in a position ready to kill. He called his pistol “Mjølner,” after Thor’s magic hammer in Norse mythology, and his gun “Gugne,” which is Odin’s magical spear of eternal return. These names also were carved onto the gun and pistol with Rune letters.

The same holds for the car used to transport Mjølner and Gugne to Utøya. Breivik named his vehicle “Sleipner,” which is the Old Norse label for Thor’s wagon that carries him as he roars through the universe and throws Mjølner at random, creating thunderstorms and fear of “Ragnarok”—the final cosmic battle that signals the end of life as we know it. Contemporary Odinists and Ásatrú communities take these names, and the whole Rune alphabet, to be sacred. What is said, written, and carved (riset) with intent in sacred language can take on magical, performative qualities. If so, words and symbols may become extraordinarily powerful and effective. Virtual power was therefore a main reason why Breivik riset runes for support.

About ninety minutes before the attack, Breivik also distributed via email a 1,500-page manifesto in English, titled “2083—A European Declaration of Independence.” In the manifesto he calls for the violent destruction of “Eurabia”—a concept that seems to refer to present-day European political realities that do not support ethnically “clean” homelands. Eurabia embodies the combination of Islamic migration, multiculturalism, and feminism. Breivik proposes that the only way to return to and preserve a so-called “Christian Europe” is to destroy this apparent entity. Promoting pagan local and national identities will supposedly aid in renewing cultural identity and regional belonging in each European country. For this higher goal, Breivik identifies both as a Christian and a pagan.6

Breivik’s call for embracing two seemingly opposed politico-religious traditions in order to wage war against modernity, liberal democracy, and ultimately, Islam, is not unique. As Paul Wilkinson has pointed out, unfortunately it is a typical feature of a disturbing new neo-fascist trend that presently is spreading among angry young men in Europe.5

Breivik stands out merely for orchestrating its first large-scale killing and violent revolt.

The Trial and Breivik’s Court Speeches

When the trial against Breivik started on April 16, 2012, it was unclear whether he would be sentenced to imprisonment or to lifelong compulsory psychiatric custody instead. Did Breivik act out of political conviction, or was he merely obsessed with killing, using politics as a cover for personal revenge on the world and for all that had failed in his own life? Was he linked to a larger social movement when creating a horrible spectacle—presumably to politicize the people—or was he a solitary crazy man, ready to swear an oath that he is the savior of the world, so now we can crucify him, the martyr? He was, in the end, (on August 24, 2012) sentenced as responsible, not crazy, and his acts were taken seriously as intentionally willed, and also as linked to a larger social network of like-minded people.

Breivik adheres to a conspiratory, occult worldview in which forces of good and evil are felt to be competing for radical cultural hegemony through people who belong to competing ethnic groups, classes, or races. From within his own framework, he may be said to act out a new construct of the high magician and his “strong” God. He does so via both words and guns, in both social media and public space, and he strongly believes in their joint effect.6 In fact, according to his many self-presentations in court, his main act was not the infamous killings but the creation and publication in multiple media channels of the 1,500-page manifesto. Blood had to be shed so that we would read it. Young politicians had to be killed so that the present society would collapse and we would all wake up and attend to his profound message, which he thinks of as his “good news.” Unlike the Christ he claims as his cultural anchor, Breivik did not offer to sacrifice himself in order to rescue another living being. He rather set out to capture
and sacrifice the “other” in order to rescue himself and his own male tribe, the so-called “Norwegians.”

A New Norway

Breivik requested time when the trial opened to present a summary of his manifesto; otherwise he would not cooperate in the court or answer questions. Thus he spent two hours describing a new identity project in the North. It was built around white Norwegians as an indigenous people, presumably with a coherent DNA profile, a common ancestry, bloodlines, cultural traditions, and inherited land rights that go back 12,000 years. All Norwegians were suddenly established as one single people. To be clear, Breivik even compared our (or his) case with Native Americans and indigenous peoples in Bolivia and Tibet.

The symbolic figure he most strongly promoted was the “one body unbroken,” the figures of oneness, unity, and sameness, the one sovereign head ruling the one house, the laws of the cosmos and the land being mirrored in one culture, or with the occult saying, “as above so below.” Within this framework, individual death is not an actual death since the blood of the ancestors runs through our veins; that is, we are mere individual representatives of the whole. Like his predecessors, the Nazi theologians, Breivik grossly corrupts the Christian cross and its gospel of the “weak” God incarnate, co-present and co-suffering with humans (and all of creation). To heal and make whole again an already broken (by sin) body, the continuous saving grace work is offered for free by a “weak” God. To postulate an unbroken body politic by cleansing out the “other” is exactly the opposite.

When the trial closed on June 21, 2012, Breivik was once again permitted to give a speech. This time he added a concrete demand for property and suggested that 1 to 2 percent of Norwegian land should be given to him and his allies so that they could build a separate state and practice racial homogeneity. There they could grow in number, due to all the children that would be born to them and, due to the prosperity of the culture—or so he said—they would eventually take over Norway and throw the aliens out for good. They and he would finally become “a person from the place,” a paganus, and break all bonds of co-habitation with people from elsewhere, the alienus.7 The Christian justitia aliena and its radical new understanding of what it means to love another—an alien other—as oneself, finds no resonance in Breivik’s xenophobic constructs.

Whatever Breivik’s pagan(us)ism is really about in a positive sense, it is not representative of the New Age version of peaceful nature-venerating Neopaganism, that developed in the West from the 1960s onward, a movement that many associate with Wicca. It is more representative of a hegemonic form of domination associated with Imperial Rome. In fact, Breivik’s modernist paganism (or really Odinism) is constructed from a certain memory of the old Roman and Germanic pagan empires that converted to Christianity.

Christian and Pagan—Strong Masculine Gods Versus Weakness

As already mentioned, in his manifesto, Breivik explicitly refers to the twin powerful tools of Christianity and paganism to explain his gruesome mission. In fact, he became a terrorist because he already was both a Christian and a pagan. He calls his Christianity cultural, of the medieval, empire-building type. But he is also a cultural Odinist, since he is an ethnic Norwegian and Odin was a Norse god. As a European and a federalist (as opposed to a unionist), Breivik self-identifies with Christianity. As a Norwegian and a nationalist, he self-identifies with paganism.

At the same time, Breivik is tired of what he calls the “feminine” version of Christianity that turns the other cheek and allows Europe to decay as the result of cultural Marxism in a multicultur- alist Social Democratic key, state feminism, massive immigration, and Islam. He also is tired of “feminist” pagans who meditate with trees for
peace. But then, why does he seek a solution for his discontent in a combination of Christianity and paganism?

Breivik makes a point that he is neither religious nor a believer. He is a cultural Christian and an ethnic pagan. The use of the term pagan (or neo-pagan) to describe the combined spiritual-political project of taking back forms of “folk religion,” or better, “people’s religion,” that are imagined to have existed in the West prior to Christianity, exists of course independently of Breivik. Even more, the practices have initiated a new field of study in the academy. Although classifications are constantly debated and contested, I suggest two main political directions to this reconstructive spiritual endeavor.

**Left-Wing vs. Right-Wing Paganism**

On one side, there is what we might call a radical left-wing, democratic, and multicultural goddess/god movement, in which feminism, social justice, and the ideas of nature religion and ecologically tuned spiritualities are central. The theistic concerns and problems of classical theology are mostly rejected, and practitioners seek instead personal and spiritual growth, new artistic forms of ritualizing, a new concept of nature, and new forms of healing and of community. On the opposite side we find what might be called the radical right-wing pagans, with their hierarchical and traditionalist mythological cult in which recognizable war-emblems such as Odin and Thor are recalled to strengthen nationalistic bonds, sort out friend from foe, heal afflictions, and defend masculine honor.

The first version of paganism is a dialogue-toward-the-world-oriented new religious movement. It has much in common with contemporary indigenous people’s quest to regain and define their own new-old spirituality, as is the case with segments of the Sami population in Norway. The second form of paganism, the right-wing, is more political than religious, at least in a conventional sense. It is reactionary in response to contemporary issues and seeks to reconstruct pre-Christian traditions in a manner loyal to the ancestors, for the exclusive purpose of serving their own goals. The primary aims of reconstructing their understanding of the past are to build lost self-esteem, secure identity and dialogue solely among in-groups, and invoke alternative power for themselves and their kin in the modern world. Right-wing paganism is organized on the basis of blood ties, ethnicity, and cultural ancestry or ritual initiation. Their thinking currently is being annexed by the fast-growing radical right and neo-fascist groups in both Europe and the U.S., which may or may not be in accordance with the right-wing pagans’ own desires.

What is clear is that neither the radical nationalists nor the far-right political movements that Breivik identifies with are primarily concerned with religion as faith or belief, but with religion as a social means of bonding and as a strategic means of acquiring and using power, especially the power to prevent cultural decline and the possibility that the white race “will die out.” For this larger purpose, Breivik combines his own versions of Christianity and paganism, and the blood-red Maltese cross is chosen as a main symbol for this endeavor. According to Breivik, this historic cross sign is a more unifying symbol than Thor’s hammer, and more adequate. In his manifesto Breivik writes about how he seriously considered this mighty emblem of the Old Norse god but finally rejected it because it has limited symbolic power compared to the Maltese cross. He also brags of having convinced his Odinist friends in Scandinavia of the brilliance of his analysis and strategic choice.

Mjølner, Thor’s hammer, is considered too local, too Northern European, to be able to draw together radical nationalists from, say, both the Balkans and Italy for joint military purposes, and must therefore give way to the cross. Why would a committed Italian nationalist need a barbarian hammer from the regional North if he already belongs to a powerful Catholic Church, an institution with extensive historical experience in defending the borders of Europe, and with great success? Indeed, what does Thor have to offer compared to Christ when it comes to uniting Europe and consolidating power? Breivik, who is concerned with history and logic, embraces, logically enough, Christianity as the strongest and therefore primary
symbolic horizon. At the same time he is not reluctant to conceive of himself as the god Thor when he creates his own version of Ragnarok on the island of Utøya, using Mjølner and Gugne to kill defenseless children.

**Grace or Honor? Historical Comparisons and Breivik’s Occult Framework**

The terms *pagan* and *heathen* often are used interchangeably in the media, but what does the noun or the adjective *pagan* really mean? The Norwegian *hedning* (heathen) corresponds to the Latin *pagani*, which literally meant “those who live in the countryside,” and originally had nothing to do with religious identity. In Roman daily speech, it could refer to peasants, commoners, poor folk, and slaves, to those without ancestry and therefore without direct access to public religion (which belonged to nobilities, officials, and householders). The pagani were not born from the divine stars and heavens but wholly from the earth. They lacked a cosmic lineage that could be remembered ritually and were therefore classified as inferior persons, as not fully human. When Christianity was claimed as the state religion of Rome in the late fourth century CE, pagani became the common term for all non-Christians except Jews. In addition to continuing to signify ignorant commoners, pagani also came to include civil servants of high rank who were not yet baptized and therefore not yet enlisted into the church’s battle against the devil.¹³

It is well known that in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance the church’s concept of the devil grew into a fully developed demonology. At that time paganism took on yet another meaning and became associated with witchcraft. The devil was believed to engage in subversive warfare against the church through witches, and the Inquisition and its legal apparatus took up arms against them. An overwhelming majority of those accused of witchcraft were women. They were seen as the devil’s special gateways into the community. The term *pagan* was an unstable term both in Roman and historic Christian culture and assumed different meanings depending on where borders were set and needed defending, or on how “the inferior other” was defined.¹⁴

**Witchcraft and War**

The belief in the reality of witchcraft developed in a historical society where people already were convinced that a hidden war of life and death was going on between God and the devil, which in turn spread to all things human. The warring parties, however, could only be uncovered by especially literate and sensitive priests and lawyers with a sense for devilishness and a will to clean up and eradicate the devil. According to Breivik’s manifesto, we live in a similar historical situation today, with deep cultural decay and an ongoing civil war between good and evil. The main enemy of the common good is Islam. Cultural Marxists and feminists are its evil allies and thus society’s real fifth columnists. The war takes place in secret and is therefore recognized by only a few, those with occult knowledge. Only a magician of priestly high caste can expose it and stop the destruction. In order to highlight the “seriousness” of the situation, Breivik orchestrated the bomb attack against the government building in Oslo and the massacre of youth on Utøya—both as a terrorist action and as a quasi-religious sacrificial act.

The immediate intention of the political, terrorist action was to create an extraordinary state of chaos and fear throughout the nation, something Breivik assumed would happen if he managed to damage the government’s ability to lead, and the common folk’s ability to react, by doing the unthinkable: murdering the Social Democratic party’s foot soldiers in government offices, and then murdering the Social Democratic party’s foot soldiers’ children massively and simultaneously. The larger purpose of creating such an exceptional situation was to awaken the slumbering radical nationalists.
and new-right activists and spark a sudden revolution for a new consolidated Europe.

The intention of the magical, sacrificial action, which was woven into the terrorist action, was to release an enormous amount of energy through overwhelming bloodshed, and to connect this energy with a symbol through association, and then give it direction. Breivik's chosen material symbol for his overall acts was, as mentioned, a red Maltese cross with equal arms. The cross is printed on the cover page of his manifesto. Its form alludes both to a bloody Christian crusade emblem and to elemental pagan symbolism for the four directions (or to the four elements associated with the directions). Breivik's intended goal for the direction of the released energy is expressed in the manifesto itself, which also interprets and explains the symbol. The manifesto canonizes texts of various kinds, which all explain and condemn the world's present condition along lines acceptable to Breivik's project. His own writing on how to continue the crime he himself initiated was blended in later. The manifesto's size, around 1,500 pages, is about the size of the Bible.

Without the manifesto, the massacres of July 22 would only have been gruesome and morally abominable. With the manifesto we are spun, if we read it, into the textual fields of a hidden cosmic war that we did not know was going on, and that tries to impress itself upon us with historical rhetoric and legitimizing analyses in an attempt to recruit new warriors.

**Radical Right’s Discourse on Honor and Love in Europe and America**

On the web pages of radical nationalist, new-right, far-right, and neo-fascist movements in both Europe and North America we find the same rhetorical ideals of masculinity, the same anti-modernism, the same magical play with cosmic warring principles as we find in Breivik’s text. We also find debates regarding how far visions and action platforms should weave together material from Christianity and paganism—or just from paganism, preferably of an imperial type. The New York-based journal *Telos* is the main microphone of the French New Right, which likes to think of itself as a meta-political, intellectual movement. In 1993, its late editor Paul Piccone called for the joining of the “spirit” of Christianity with the “spirit” of paganism (following the ideal of Charlemagne) as a most viable strategy if the goal is to move beyond the European New Right.

Yet, the French New Right’s chief philosopher, Alain de Benoist, completely writes off Christianity. He perceives it as a fundamentally alien ideology that was forced upon the Indo-European peoples two millennia ago. Already in his 1981 book *On Being a Pagan* (translated into English in 2004), he advocates resuscitating paganism as the overarching federate principle of society, along the lines of Imperial Rome. Values such as tradition, dignity, and honor would accordingly be given the highest position, while simultaneously a plurality of harmless and festive local, cultural, and religious expressions would be allowed. This principle is explicitly not multiculturalism but rather diversity within unity. According to de Benoist, a new European empire of federal states may successfully be created under such a banner.

The fact that Breivik’s declaration of war is not supported by groups who share his dark analysis of the world is not so much due to ideological disagreement as to the fact that Breivik reportedly acted against the principles of Norse honor codes by killing unarmed youth of his own race. To liquidate children face-to-face expresses a lack of pagan compassion for fellow human beings and is not worthy of support by right-wingers or neo-fascists, as we read on the website of the right-wing anarchist Oskorei. He calls Breivik’s massacre “hyper-political” and without connection to reality, and therefore counter-productive to the larger cause. But the action is not rejected as morally reprehensible, criminal, or in conflict with other basic right-wing pagan norms. It is dismissed rather because it is dishonorable and tasteless. However, some individuals with obvious fascist sympathies and hyper-political desires, have posted videos on
YouTube where Breivik’s atrocity is explained and defended with an appeal to the viewer to do the same.

**Crimes out of “Love”**

Greg Johnson, editor of the North American Counter-Currents Publishing, is perhaps the most interesting indicator that Breivik is being closely watched by the American New Right. In May 2012, during the trial, Johnson wrote that he had suddenly gained a “strange new respect” for Breivik because “he has comported himself in a dignified manner and made a forceful, intelligent, well-argued case for his views and actions.” Johnson certainly disagrees with Breivik’s method of trying to polarize the political field through killing, thus losing the middle ground. This will not work, argues Johnson, unless white radicals have *a real somewhere else to go*, not just an imaginary Knight Templars Internet life. They need alternative communities for positive “radical right” living, not just revolt. Due to its violent, revolutionary spirit, Breivik’s “political model” shares too many features with the totalitarian Old Right and Old Left. Thus, from a North American New Right perspective, “Breivik’s overall strategy is counter-productive. Our race will not be saved by armed struggle, but by transformation of consciousness and culture,” writes Johnson. He continues, “Yet, in the end, for all of his crimes and mistakes, I cannot judge Breivik too harshly. He is an awakened white man, and those are all too rare. In spite of his errors, he was acting out of loyalty to our people, and that matters a great deal. Yes, he committed crimes. But he committed them out of love.”

**Ruled by Fear or by Grace? Beyond Right and Left, Christian and Pagan**

As stated above, there is an essential difference between the new political right-wing pagans and the new religious left-wing pagans. One of Breivik’s proclaimed enemies is the author Starhawk, who is listed in the bibliography of his manifesto on a par with critical theorists (the Frankfurt School). She is a Jewish feminist Wiccan and a nonviolent peace activist in the “Global Justice” and “Occupy” movements in the U.S. Since 1979 she has been one of the leaders in a left-wing pagan Wicca tradition in the U.S. called “Reclaiming,” and also self-identifies as an “earth activist.” Reclaiming builds its spiritual practices from the experience of the earth, the one we walk on, as a living being, a sacred organism that must be treated as a subject. Reclaiming claims that power is something all human beings possess by virtue of inherent dignity, born of the earth. In the ancient Roman Empire, Starhawk’s “earth religion” would have been typical of the inferior, poor *pagani*, without descent lines back to an honorable cosmic ancestry and therefore also without the rights to administer sacrificial religion or cult, condemned to merely offering bread and wine to the chthonic spirits underground, their kindred, or to being amused at public festivals.

Starhawk’s concept of holiness is thus no reconstruction of ancient Roman (or Norse or German) paganism as remembered in the sagas, but rather quite new and implies simultaneously the deconstruction of the dualism of God and the devil as external forces that “cause” good and evil human deeds. In addition Starhawk is, like Noam Chomsky, one of the leaders of the prefigurative left-wing anarchism. According to their political theories, social changes are to be created primarily through the forms used to organize them. If the goal is a healthier, better society with more direct democracy, greater tolerance for differences, better management of natural resources, and less economic greed, then the political work to achieve the goal must be organized in a way that actually incorporates these same traits. There could not be a greater difference between values, means, and ends than that between Anders Behring Breivik and Starhawk. The fact that both use terms or symbols that are associated with various forms of paganism, historic or contemporary, says just as much and just as little as that followers of the Ku Klux Klan and of Martin Luther King, Jr. both called themselves Christians.
Life and Love

Likewise, the church that Breivik wants to pay allegiance to is not “the church” that most radically responded to his kill. It is not even churchy, monumental, or set-apart. For the real life-saving alternative to Breivik’s terror on July 22 took place in parallel historical time to Breivik’s massacre, there and then at Utøya among politically minded young equals. It happened when children, shot and wounded, stopped to lift up and carry other wounded friends, even though they risked death and more of Breivik’s bullets.

In Room 250 in Oslo District Court (Tingrett) in May 2012, survivors from Utøya gave a most astonishing witness. We heard about a boy who picked up a girl shot four times as he was running to hide. She was shot behind the piano and survived under a pile of dead bodies, yet she was unable to walk. Her right arm was split in two, her jaw was hanging, and she tried to keep her mouth in place with her left hand. As the boy ran for his life with the wounded girl in his arms, more friends came to help him. They ran together to a temporarily safe place. Here, the kids carefully put down the wounded girl in the grass. They took off their own clothes and wrapped them around her body to stop the bleeding. They pressed stones hard against the open holes where bullets had entered. They helped her hold her jaw together. Then all of a sudden Breivik appeared on the pathway, a few feet away. They were all sure they would die, and for good reason. The wounded girl told the jury how she at this moment was reasoning from her place in the grass, surrounded by friends, and without fear: “So this is how it is to die, how ordinary.” While looking at some leaves close to the ground she remembered thinking: “How beautiful a leaf really is after the rain.”

The anxious expectation of immediate death apparently had been fractured by other thoughts of the present. Feelings of despair and abandonment had for a moment been transformed into warm, sad feelings of sharing an “ordinary” (love) event: touching hands, being held, and meeting a prospective deadly destiny together. Yet Breivik looked in the opposite direction, not at the grasses but at the sea. He did not see them, and killed thirteen young people hidden behind the pump house instead. The kids and the wounded girl in the grass were listening and watching as the massacre occurred on the opposite side of the trail, not panicking, just crying silently. Some of them said to the jury that they were not afraid of dying, and since they happened to live they know that even from the darkest of events something new may grow. After all, Breivik “only” killed sixty-nine and wounded thirty-three out of 564. A majority did not die. They were saved.

“Christian” Acts?

This non-fear of life and death, this love and care and trust in “whatever” that has taken hold of a new generation of young Norwegians, has never been represented before in public media (we do not know their formal religious memberships, if they have any, and none of them used God-language in the courtroom). Until the trial started and the survivors began to give witness in the semi-public court and tell their stories, this side of things was unknown, un-revealed. Thus, an extremely important question comes up: Breivik claims to be a Christian; the children do not, or are totally quiet about religious identity. Can their acts still be interpreted as Christian acts, and if so, in what sense? And what does it mean? If the norms expressed in the loving gestures that the (nominally non-Christian?) kids showed toward each other can be, or must be, understood also in light of Norwegian religious and political history, and therefore also as an expression of contemporary Norwegian Christian and moral culture, what is the challenge here to theology, and how is it different from the one set by Breivik’s case?

A New Reading

Is it that Breivik’s (probably baptized) claim of belonging to “Christianity” automatically puts him
within the fenced grace of a “strong” God, in spite of acts that kill untouchable God-given human life, and in spite of his accompanying efforts to repudiate the concept and experience of grace as such? Or, is it that signs of love between possibly unbaptized young non-believers facing death must be understood as signs of another love, another grace, than what is of God? What is a love that overcomes the agony of death if not a “weak” God present with us? What is grace at all, if not a pump house?

Yet, if these are relevant questions, it must be remembered that we have explained nothing if we resort to merely calling Breivik’s violent religion really pagan and the non-violent loving acts at Utøya really Christian. The totality and complexity of the Norwegian situation post-July 2011 demands, in other words, completely new and critical readings of terms and concepts that have hitherto been stable, but are no longer so.

Endnotes

1. In the process of writing this essay for an English-speaking audience, earlier versions have been read as paper presentations in several different academic settings: at the American Academy of Religion in November 2011; at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa in March 2012; at the Nordic Meeting of Systematic Theology at Iceland in January 2013; at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California in May 2013; at a Ph.D. course for students from three continents in Oslo, Norway, in October 2013 (organized by UKZN, Union Theological Seminary, and University of Oslo). I am very appreciative of the constructive and critical feedback and comments that helped me nuance and develop the paper further, and also for what I learned from the discussions it raised. I also want to thank Hal Reynolds, Marion Grau, and Sarah Pike for generous help with proofreading services at various stages. Time has come to let this essay “freeze” into printed form, and I am grateful to be able to print it with easy access, or help her or him skip over the difficulty of finding, searching, scrolling, and eventually reading “for herself” this corrupt document. My ongoing work on Breivik is an integral part of the “July 22 project” under REDO: Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource, funded by the Norwegian Research Council 2013–2017, online at http://www.tf.uio.no/english/research/projects/redo/.

2. Not-fully humans (or degenerate or non-human humans) included Jews, homosexuals, Romani people, non-Germanic immigrants, slaves/forced laborers in concentration camps, etc.

3. For more on people’s immediate responses to terror through ritualized acts of filling up (occupying) the streets of Oslo with flowers and grief, see Olaf Aagedal and Ida Marie Høeg, eds., Den Offentlige Sorgen (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2012).

4. Breivik emailed his manifesto to 8,109 select addresses, yet only 958 received it. When summarizing or referring to the manifesto, I will not use page numbers or cite exact phrases. This is in accordance with the Norwegian practice established shortly after the tragic event. Many young people refused to utter Breivik’s name, or simply called him ABB. Under no circumstances did they want to spread his fascist “gospel” by representing his text correctly. The manifesto is still available on the Internet for anyone to read, yet I will not aid my prospective reader with easy access, or help her or him skip over the difficulty of finding, searching, scrolling, and eventually reading “for herself” this corrupt document. My ongoing work on Breivik is an integral part of the “July 22 project” under REDO: Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource, funded by the Norwegian Research Council 2013–2017, online at http://www.tf.uio.no/english/research/projects/redo/.


8. In the American Academy of Religion this new disciplinary field is labeled “Contemporary Pagan Studies” and organized on the level of Group.

9. For more on this version of neopaganism, see Salomonsen, Enchanted Feminism.


11. On July 22, 2011, I participated at the Sami “Riddu-Riddu” festival in Kåfjord, Troms, together with REDO scholar Graham Harvey. As the bomb blasted in Oslo, a lively seminar was taking place at Riddu, where the importance of incorporating Sami forms of healing into Christian faith practices were discussed and endorsed. For more on this event, cf. Jone Salomonsen, “Kristendom, paganisme og kvinnefiendskap,” in Akademiske perspektiver på 22. juli, ed. Anders Ravik Jupskås (Oslo: Akademika forlag, 2012).


15. The so-called magical practice of “causing change according to will” by first choosing a symbol, then “charging” the symbol with will-energy, then “sending” the bundle imaginatively and willed “off into space,” with a distinct address and intention, is contested on cognitive as well as ethical grounds by many contemporary Neopagans. They consider its underlying definition of magic old-fashioned and mentalist, or even superstitious. They have redefined magic to mean “the art of changing consciousness at will.” See Salomonsen, Enchanted Feminism.

16. For example are articles by the Norwegian ultranationalist and separatist Fjordmann included on par with blog material from the ultra-conservative “Vienna School of Thought.”


21. For more on Starhawk see Salomonsen, Enchanted Feminism, or consult one of her own books, for example Starhawk, The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature (New York: HarperOne, 2004).