

## Can There Be Peace? Violence in the name of religion.

### Some considerations around the atrocities in Norway July 22. and what this reveals about the situation of the Church of Norway

Rev. Jan Bygstad, Bergen, Norway

1. Norway is a small country. 4,9 mill. citizens.

July 22. we were hit by terror. An attack both on the government through a car bomb (8 dead). And the slaughter on idealistic youth gathered in a political summer camp (69 victims, the youngest only 14 years of age). The terrorist reportedly shouted with joy each time he succeeded in killing another youngster.

The first days the whole nation was struck with horror and left us numb. The Norwegian naïveté and "innocence" in a way had been killed also: How could this happen to *us*, -the country of the Nobel peace prize? Part of the shock was caused by the fact that this was not an outbreak of Islamic terror, but had been done by "one of our own". Gradually sorrow and a strong feeling of national unity took over. Roses became a symbol of sorrow and hope. People crying openly in the streets and embracing even total strangers for comfort has been a not uncommon sight. And in a national memorial arrangement even our king Harald V shed tears publicly in his speech.

2. Norway was hit by evil. Evil always need to justify itself. The best way of doing this is by maintaining that it is done for the sake of an honorable/good cause (cf. communism, nazism, inquisition).

The consequences are

Politically - the goal justifies the means (cf. Machiavelli), and

Psychologically - conscience is silenced, - which may be a main feature of ideology, and

Morally - man never does more evil than when he is fighting for "a good cause".

The defense has publicly stated that Anders Behring Breivik is 'insane', that he is "not like us/ordinary people". The dangerous consequence of asserting this, is that responsibility thereby is diluted or even removed:

- insanity is a term fetched from pathology, while
- evil is an ethical term.

3. Anders Behring Breivik has maintained that he is "a Christian". Not in a sense that he prays, attends church or has a personal faith in Jesus, but in a cultural sense. One of the leading police officers the day after Breivik had been apprehended stated that Breivik was a "Christian fundamentalist". Of course this terrorist is no Christian in the true meaning of the word, just as little as he was a police officer even though he was dressed up as one.

But Anders Behring Breivik regards himself as a knight fighting against the great evil represented by Islam, an evil that only can be defeated through military means. One of his great ideals is Karl Martell who in 732 prevailed in the battle of Poitiers and thus halted Muslim expansion in Europe for almost 700 years; another is the order of Knights Templar from the period of the crusades.

It all comes down to "the battle between civilizations". In his manifesto that was published on the internet the day before the atrocities, Anders Behring Breivik regards himself as the defender of Christian civilization against the barbarism and tyranny of Islam. His enemy is Islam, *and* all who have opened the doors for the Muslim immigration into Europe. Those who advocate a pluralistic society with tolerance and respect towards every belief and conviction, he regards as traitors because they leave our society defenseless against a future Muslim takeover. He calls the secular idea of tolerance within the framework of a liberal democratic society "cultural marxism", and the whole political establishment that advocates the modern pluralistic welfare society to him are Judases and "the enemy within".

Consequently our own government has become his prime target, which he must direct his first attack upon in the war he meant to open. The slaughter of the vast number of youth was intended to quench the interest of youngsters for the Labor Party and prevent further enrollment into this party. In the wake of the events these days, quite the opposite has turned out to be the consequence.

Ideologically the closest parallel in the US probably is the Oklahoma bomber in 1995. Timothy McVeigh's thinking seems in many ways to resemble Anders Behring Breivik's.

4. The reaction and sorrow - especially to the shootings of the youngsters - was national. This was our 9/11. Prime minister Stoltenberg was very quick in stating that this was an attack on our democracy and the values that almost unanimously have been regarded as fundamental to our society: Tolerance, openness and multiculturalism. And what he wanted to be the national answer to this act of terror was "more democracy, more openness, more tolerance". If not the terrorist would have achieved exactly what was his goal. And we should not allow our society to be defined by this extremist's agenda.

Four days after the attacks there was arranged in Oslo (our capital) a large manifestation of mourning and resistance against violence/terror. (Oslo has about 600.000 citizens, approximately 200 - 300.000 people attended). Here the mayor of Oslo in his speech said that "we shall punish the terrorist. We shall punish him by not letting him achieve any of his aims. We shall punish him with tolerance, with openness, with love".

An important second part of the reaction is the religious one. The churches around the country have been opened up and filled with people lighting candles for the dead, laying down flowers in their honor and memory. And ministers and bishops within the state church system suddenly got an important role in "comforting teams" together with psychologists with responsibility to care for the mourners, families and friends of the victims, and for the survivors after the shootings. Certainly many of the youngsters from Utøya have been traumatized by the horrors they have experienced, and are in need of help, comfort and treatment for months and perhaps years to come.

What is conspicuous about the role of the Church of Norway and its servants, is that it has walked into this therapeutic role defined by public need without hesitation. It seemed that suddenly vast numbers of people in a secular and irreligious society were in need of a religious kind of comfort. And when the church experienced that it was needed, it grabbed the opportunity with both hands, - without questioning the premises. A number of years ago a former teacher of practical theology (Olav Skjevesland, now bishop) stated a comment on the transformation of the ministry of the church that has taken place as a growing number of women has been ordained:: "The ministry of word and sacrament has been replaced by the ministry of caring and comforting". Two important features of the national church's role may here be pointed out:

- a) the name of Christ has scarcely been mentioned. The leaders of the church have limited themselves to a general and very unspecific "God-talk". But which god?
- b) The god that has been preached is a therapeutic one, "a shrink" to say it a bit disrespectfully. This means that the Church of Norway in this situation has reduced itself and its message to be a part of the social welfare system taking care of people's psychological health and religious comfort. A secular journalist comments on this as follows: "After July 22nd the church has taken up the role as administrator of public sorrow, willingly paying the price through ideological self-annihilation".

In the history of the church national disasters have been met with a totally different attitude: The people sought to the churches to repent and confess their sins, to cry out for the mercy of God, that he might turn away his wrath. The difference between the present religious reaction and the past reveals a deep shift in the mentality of our nation, a shift that also brings to light some of the psychology of secularization: Our main problem is that we hurt because we are hit by evil, not that we ourselves are evil. Our problem is "the others", those who not are as tolerant as we are. Consequently we do not need grace or salvation, only comfort and explanation. And the church portrays God as the sympathetic God, God on our side: God's job is to fulfill our felt needs.

5. What we here have touched upon, is the result of a transformation of The Church of Norway (the state church system) that has been going on the last half century. In a way I think that the thinking of Anders Behring Breivik and the horrors that he has brought upon our small country also can shed some light on the role and development of the church and

Christianity in this age of secularization in Scandinavia and Europe as a whole. Allow me to share some thoughts around this with you:

a. When Anders Behring Breivik looks upon himself as a crusader in the "war between civilizations", he is promoting an idea of the Christian civilization that goes back to Constantine the Great, emperor of the Roman empire from 312 - 337, and which reached its peak in the medieval period. Constantine caused the most important turnaround both for the early Christian church and the Roman empire that took place in ancient history. Up until the year 313 the church had periodically been persecuted in the most cruel way. Under Constantine's predecessor, Diocletian (305 - 311), the worst and bloodiest of all persecutions in the roman empire took place. But in 313 Constantine authored the "Edict of Milan" (or "Edict of tolerance") which gave full acceptance of Christians within the empire and put a final end to the ancient martyrdom of the church. 11 years later Constantine made Christianity the favored religion within the empire, supporting the church in every possible way, - including the building of large churches and cathedrals all over the empire. This development reached its peak under the emperor Theodosius (emperor 379 - 395), who in 380 made Christianity the official state religion, and in 391 the only legal religion, closing down and destroying heathen temples and forbidding heathen worship. These decisions by Constantine and Theodosius framed and lay down the fundamentals of what became the basic characteristics of European culture for the next 1500 years:

1. The strong bond between church and state; the state is a Christian state, and Christianity the only legal religion.
2. Europe as the Christian culture.
3. The identification of the population as a whole with the church: The people is a Christian people.

Since these two emperors western culture has shaped a historical epoch that may be called "the constantine period/age", an age that now is coming to an end.

The constantine linking of imperial power with ecclesial authority by and by resulted in deep consequences for the church, consequences that implied a remolding of Christendom. I here will pinpoint only a few important features:

- a) While Jesus said that his "kingdom was not of this world" (John 18,36f), the church to a large extent now became of this world.
- b) While Jesus taught that the use of force, power and violence belonged to the princes of this world, his church should be characterized by meekness, willing service and love of one's neighbor (Math 20,25-28), and rather suffer evil than inflicting it on others. This also is an important part of the message of the Sermon on the mount. St Augustine struggled with this question: Was it acceptable that the emperor used the sword to bring people(s) into the fold of the church? He found - although hesitantly - the theological foundation for legitimating this in the words in Luke 14,23 (the parable of the great banquet): "*compel them to come in*" (KJV). This set a path for

the expansion of Christianity that dominated much of the medieval period - even up to the religious wars of the 17th century: The sword - royal power - became a most important "missionary" instrument.

- c) Christian morality became the norm of legislation within the civil society, and regulated all parts of European people's lives.
- d) Christian faith became the forming influence in all parts of what we call "culture": Literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture and so forth.

The crusaders' making war on Islam in the name of Christ is mainly a part of this constantine inheritance: Defending Christian faith and defending the Christian nations was one and the same thing. It also is this tradition that Anders Behring Breivik is utilizing in his war on the infidels.

In the NT we find an episode where Peter tries to defend Christ with a sword (Matth 26,51f). We all know what our Lord has to say about this. And it is deeply significant that what Peter is cutting off when attacking the servant of the high priest, is his ear: *Violence in the name of Christ disables hearing!*

The connection between church and state, faith and secular power that characterizes the constantine era, has been a constant spiritual trap and temptation to the church, as well as a kind of prison: What Jesus taught was to be separated, secular and spiritual power, have been mixed together. The two governments according to Jesus' teaching are to be ruled in totally different ways: The kingdom of God shall rule men's *hearts* by the sword of God - his word *only*, the government of this world is to rule over our physical life through the means of secular power - if necessary police and military force (Rom 13). The mixture of worldly and spiritual power that the state church system implies, too often result in some kind of tyranny: *Either* in the form that the church searches worldly dominion (which was the case during the medieval period and in Calvin's Geneva), *or* when secular power wants dominion over the church (so called "caesaropapalism"). The princes of this world always have abused religion as part of their "powerplay", - religion is an excellent instrument to control people. The Scandinavian churches, particularly Denmark and Norway, probably hold the world championship of governmental rule over the church.

b. The Augustine idea to "compel them" has as we have seen, legitimized the use of violence in the name of Christ. It is sad to observe how even the church's best theologians and teachers may err in the need to justify status quo. The idea of using force in service of the gospel is totally contrary to the gospel. The two main reasons are that

1. It belongs to the essence of the gospel that it is an expression of "the weakness of God" (1Cor 1,25).
2. The only means that has been given to the church for the salvation of men, are the means of grace, and particularly "the word of the cross" (1Cor 1,18ff).

"The weakness of God" is God's way of salvation. Jesus says: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth

forth much fruit" (KJV Joh12,24). God is revealing himself under what seems contradictory to what he is: His almightiness looks like weakness. His wisdom like stupidity. The man that he wants to give life, must die. The cross on which Christ was gloriously victorious over sin, Satan and death looks like a total and disgraceful defeat in men's eyes. In this way God conceals himself to all flesh and disbelief. But reveals himself to faith - and faith alone. Human strength, which expresses itself in might, force and violence, in this way becomes the opposite of the gospel. The will to exercise power is flesh, and a satanic temptation to the church. (*The state* has in contrast to this been given a mandate from God to exercise power as a barrage against evil (Rom 13,1ff). The church on the other hand is a spiritual kingdom, and individual Christians have no such mandate). This is why our Lord extols that which is small and weak, but degrades that which is big (Matth 18,1-5; 20,25-28).

Secondly God's "mode of operation" is through his word. When God wants something done, he speaks. This is how it was in the beginning when he created heaven and earth. And this is the way that he spreads and enlarges his spiritual kingdom on earth. God's word is the secret of his kingdom. And all other means are flesh. Through His word God speaks to man's heart, and to try to coerce the heart has never been Christ's way. *This means that all true and godly work in Christ's kingdom on earth rests in faith in the efficacy of the word.* In the end you and I cannot do God's work - it is God's word alone that has this ability and power.

c. When the Lutheran reformation came to Denmark and Norway and these two countries in 1537 became Lutheran, this was a royal decision quite in line with constantine tradition. There is no reason to doubt that the king personally was convinced by the Lutheran teaching. But he certainly also had a large amount of self-interest in his religious politics, as he now could confiscate all the properties of the church: Vast riches fell under the crown.

In his struggle to protect the newborn evangelical church, Luther allied with the princes. This resulted in a bond between church and state in the Lutheran countries that was far stronger and more wide reaching than what had been the case during the catholic period. The catholic church maintained a relative independence in its relation to royal power, but such an independence was almost totally obliterated in the Lutheran countries. Church and state became one, the state was a confessional state, and the king was "summus episcopus" of the church. (Augsburg 1555: "Cuius regio - eius religio"). This also is the reason why Denmark and Norway never got the Book of Concord as its confessional foundation like all other Lutheran nations: When king Fredrik II was presented the Book of Concord during the winter 1581, he by a whim threw it in the stove stating that he had "had enough of the quarreling of the theologians". During the pietistic period we had "state pietism" in Denmark - Norway, and the inhabitants were by law forced to attend church (1735: "The sabbath ordinance"). For instance no one were allowed to marry if they not were confirmed; consequently young men and women who had difficulties learning Pontoppidan's Catechism by heart would not be able to have their own families. This use of political force on behalf of the church has not been forgotten, and has caused quite a bit of resentment against Christian faith in our countries.

The bond between church and state was preserved when Norway got its own democratic constitution in 1814: The king remained head of the Church of Norway. In 1884 parliamentarism was introduced in Norway, with the consequence that the king was forced to give the governmental power over to the parties that were in majority in the national assembly ('Stortinget'). To the church this meant that the head of the church no longer was the Christian king, but a government elected by the people. The king was (and still is) in the constitution bound to the Lutheran confession. Not so the various political parties and their representatives.

After WW II the social democratic party (the 'Labor party') has been the major political force in our country. This party has had a quite distinct religious agenda and policy which it in line with caesaropapalism to a growing extent has made the most of, - even unto what many within the church would call abusing its power. The prevailing ideology in this area is that since almost all Norwegians are members of the state church (about 87%), the elected government represents the people in the church. Leading ideological thinkers have stated that "the state is the church" (Castberg, 1953; Børre Knudsen-dommen, 1981). The idea further is that since the whole people are members of the church, and as such baptized Christians, *it is the people's will that should govern the church and what the church believes*. This is called - with a German word - "Volkskircheideologie": The church is the people and the people the church. One of the members of the government said it this way when another liberal bishop had been appointed: "The king (government) leads the way; the church follows." Sadly this is exactly what has become the case: Popular religiosity and ethical indifference has become normative for the church.

The government implements its undermining of the confession of the church through its legal right to appoint bishops and deans. And through the last decades they have installed bishops with a constantly liberal persuasion. By now eight of eleven bishops are in favor of gay marriages, and the other three are teaching that this is an *adiaphoron*, an issue that not is of such importance that we need to break up ecclesial unity or to fight over it.

d. What kind of men and women is it that are willing to go along this way, preaching what people like and the social democratic party propagates? An important feature with the state church system is that theological education has been given in the state's universities, and not in confessional seminaries governed by the church itself. Since the enlightenment, theological education has been dominated by the so called "historical critical method", in time resulting in the most radical criticism of the Holy Bible and its message itself.

[In Norway we have had a free theological institution since 1907, "Menighetsfakultetet". The Menighetsfakultet has educated most of the pastors that are in office in the state church for a century. Even though the historical critical method was accepted there from the start, this institution managed to safeguard a conservative Lutheran stand up until the 1960'ies. In 1973 Menighetsfakultetet made a turnaround in its stand on WO - (the first female pastor was ordained in Norway in 1961) - and this fuelled a development away from Biblical authority that gradually has become a landslide within the Church of Norway. Presently it

seems that about half of the professors (5 or 6 of 11) at the faculty are in favor of gay marriages.]

In Sweden some of the theologians setting the tone have advocated what they call "open revelation" in contrast with "closed revelation". Closed revelation means that what God has revealed about himself and his will has been given within historic revelation, that is Holy Scripture. "Open revelation" implies the idea that God continues revealing himself through history. The Holy Ghost speaks through "the spirit of the times", and it is the bishops who - as leaders of the church - have been given the prophetic office of interpreting this revelation. In such a perspective the Bible of course is reduced to an accidental expression of "the spirit of its times", conditioned by the interests and hopes of chance religious groups in Israel. The Bible only reflects the subjective ideas of these groups, and consequently cannot be said to represent absolute truth, far less be an infallible source of faith. To the church then the task is to be able to extract what is of "religious value" in the Bible - and scrap all else that is contrary to our ideas. We end up with a church that to a large extent adapt to popular religion, a religion that R. Niebuhr already in the 1930'ies characterized like this: "A God without wrath permits (a) man without sin through a Christ without cross into an eternity without hell."

This is of course nothing else than a postmodern version of subjective religiosity, sharing the basic postmodern rejection of absolute truth and all that is holy, and is advocating tolerance and openness as its fundamental creed. You may believe whatever you like as long as you limit yourself to saying that this is "true for me" and not confess your faith to be absolute truth. This has become the ultimate demand for a bishop in the Church of Sweden, and the church of Norway is going down the same path - only a bit slower. Secularization in Europe - and Scandinavia - not only means that the constantine era is coming to an end and that Christian faith no longer has any influence on society and the people in general; secularization even implies that the churches are being secularized, leaving them void of a confessional backbone and diluting their message into a wishy-washy humanism.

The adapting of the church to what modern man thinks and holds true is a kind of ecclesial counter-strategy: It is an attempt to halt the flow of people leaving church and Christian faith by demonstrating that Christendom is relevant to modern man. Paradoxically - while making journalists and mass media more "positive" towards the church - this strategy has turned out to be futile: The churches are being preached empty. When the church tries to be "relevant" on the conditions set by secular man, it loses its relevance, it's got nothing of real importance to say. The sad thing about all this is that the church through all this ceases being "the salt of the earth". But "if the salt has lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."

I here have to add that there still is a number of faithful pastors within the state church system, both in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. But their number is diminishing, and they often have a very difficult situation - at some occasions almost persecution-like. The establishment of the church strongly dislike their presence, and mass media often give them



a hard time. The confessional movement in Norway, FBB ("For Bible and Confession"), that 40 years ago still was a strong movement within the church has been radically reduced last 20 years, in that most pastors in the church now regard membership as a heavy strain on them and their ecclesial career.

I also have to mention an imitative that was taken 4 years ago, called "Carissimi" (the Latin word for "beloved ones", which John the Apostle uses in his first letter when addressing the congregations). The men behind this initiative are ministers and theologians with clear heads and warm hearts. Their goal and hope is to secure a safe haven for confessional ministers and congregations within the state church system through an establishment of a confessional diocese in the church, guaranteeing an episcopacy in line with biblical Lutheran faith and practice. The number of ministers supporting this petition was so substantial that the bishops could not overlook them (because of fear that they would resign, something that would create great difficulties because of the lack of clergy). Consequently there has been a number of meetings where negotiations have been going on for a few years, but it all probably will come to nothing. A couple of ministers already have given in and left, and I think more will follow.

The sad story of the downfall of the Lutheran churches in Scandinavia - I have here of course mainly concentrated on the situation in my own country - is the story of what happens when false doctrine, unbiblical teaching, is not refuted: It is like gangrene. If not cut off, it will spread and in the end lead to death. Guarding biblical doctrine is to the Christian church the same as the immune system to our bodies. It safeguards us from dangerous infections that might threaten life itself. We all know what happens if the immune system fails ....

Well, to conclude:

- a) Lutherans are today an endangered species in the Scandinavian countries, and Lutheran faith threatened with being reduced into a historical parenthesis. The national churches have as a whole left their Lutheran and Biblical basis, only being "Lutheran" in name, not in reality.
- b) The state church system is gradually coming to an end. In Sweden this already has happened. In Norway the national assembly has decided to dissolve the bond between church and state in 2014. In Denmark there seems to be no such process going on at present. What is interesting with the cases in Sweden and Norway is that the politicians have wanted to preserve the state church system - and thus to be in control - up until the biblical and confessional backbone of the churches has been broken. Then the churches no longer represent any theological salt that might represent a threat to those in power.
- c) The growing forth of pluralistic secular societies means the end of the constantine period with its unified and singular national culture and religion. In such eras of transition there always will be unrest and uncertainty about the future. Not a few are

looking back, wanting to reverse the development because of the fear this is creating. Anders Behring Breivik is an extreme representative of this nostalgic trend.

- d) Can there be peace? In a democratic secular society it is self-evident that tolerance is a basic condition for peace between the different religious and ethnic groups. What is alarming is that the word "tolerance" also has been given a new meaning: It now implies that it is no longer acceptable to maintain absolute truth or that there is an absolute line between good and evil. The word *tolerance* has become a crowbar being used to compel everybody into relativism, thus also becoming an instrument to cower Christian churches into silence - particularly on ethical issues. Thus tolerance has become repressive. For instance to preach the biblical message on God's will on holy matrimony and of what is sinful in violating the sixth commandment has become "hate speech" that might be persecuted under civil law. The strange thing is that this seems only to apply to Christians, not Muslims ...
- e) Can there be peace? We do not know the future. What now is happening in western culture is signaling a more difficult situation for Christian faith. Here we have solemn promises from our Lord:
- i. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. Joh14,27
  - ii. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. Joh16,33

The church of Christ in the end never has been given anything else to build upon than his word. On this foundation we may be of good courage whatever the world might expose us to.

So the Constantine period is coming to an end. Which means that the true Christian church gradually will find itself in a situation similar to what was the case during the first three centuries: Becoming a despised minority and losing the privileges that we have become too accustomed to. This may be an advantage to the church, as it always has been during times of adversity and troubles the church of Christ has gained health and found back to her true identity. Yes, we may be of good courage!