U.S. conservatives on defense after Oslo killings

by David Gibson
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(RNS) For years, many religious and political conservatives in the U.S. have sought to connect Islam to violence carried out by Muslims, and argued that Muslims often fail to denounce terrorism committed by Islamic extremists.

But in the wake of the horrific attacks in Norway by a right-wing extremist who identified himself as a Christian warrior against Islam, many of those American conservatives are finding themselves on the defensive, especially after some of them prematurely portrayed the terror attacks as the works of Muslims.

Mark Juergensmeyer, author "Terror in the Mind of God," noted close parallels between the 32-year-old Norwegian man, Anders Behring Breivik, who killed at least 76 people in coordinated attacks on government buildings in Oslo and a youth rally at a nearby island, and Timothy McVeigh, the anti-government radical behind the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

"If [Osama] bin Laden is a Muslim terrorist, Breivik and McVeigh are surely Christian ones," Juergensmeyer, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, wrote on the blog Religion Dispatches.

"Breivik was fascinated with the Crusades and imagined himself to be a member of the Knights Templar, the crusader army of a thousand years ago."

"But in an imagined cosmic warfare time is suspended, and history is transcended as the activists imagine themselves to be acting out

timeless roles in a sacred drama. The tragedy is that these religious fantasies are played out in real time, with real and cruel consequences."

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen made the connection even more explicit:

"Breivik has many ideological fellow travelers on both sides of the Atlantic," Cohen wrote in an essay titled "Breivik and His Enablers" and posted on Monday. "Theirs is the poison in which he refined his murderous resentment."

Blogger Charles Johnson of Little Green Footballs piled on, saying that right-wing provocateurs "who spew apocalyptic rhetoric and refuse to denounce the extremists among them now have the very real blood of children on their hands."

The finger of blame tended to point toward people like Pamela Geller, the anti-Islamist writer who helped foment opposition to a mosque planned near Ground Zero.

Breivik's 1,500-page manifesto cites a number of American writers who denounce Islam and promote Western culture, such as Geller and Robert Spencer, who operates the Jihad Watch website.

Geller and Spencer did not take kindly to the associations.

"Attempts to link us to these murders on the basis of alleged postings by the murderer mentioning us are absurd and offensive," Geller wrote at her website, Atlas Shrugs. Breivik "is responsible for his actions. He and only he."

Spencer also rejected suggestions that Breivik "has anything remotely to do with anything we have ever advocated." In a later blog posting, he grew even more defiant: "The Breivik murders are being used to discredit all resistance to the global jihad and Islamic supremacism. But we're stealing it back."

Other conservatives deployed calmer arguments to put distance between Breivik and conservatism and Christianity, much as Muslims try

to distinguish between "genuine" Islam and the actions of extremists.

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat argued that Breivik bore much the same relationship to conservatism as the notorious anti-technology Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, did to Al Gore's environmentalism -- which is to say, hardly any.

Douthat instead advised his fellow conservatives to push back against such analogies -- and what he saw as liberal efforts to exploit the tragedy for political gain -- by acknowledging Breivik as a "right-winger" but at the same time reasserting the truth of their own convictions about Islam and the wider cultural peril facing the West. If Breivik shared some of those convictions, Douthat argued, his actions don't automatically invalidate them.

Bruce Bawer, who lives in Oslo and is author of "Surrender:// Appeasing Islam, Sacrificing Freedom," made a similar argument in The Wall Street Journal, writing that Breivik had hurt his cause.

"In Norway, to speak negatively about any aspect of the Muslim faith has always been a touchy matter, inviting charges of `Islamophobia' and racism," Bawer wrote. "It will, I fear, be a great deal more difficult to broach these issues now that this murderous madman has become the poster boy for the criticism of Islam."

In many respects, these conservatives are victims not only of their past rhetoric holding all Muslims to account for the actions of a few, but also of hair-trigger reflexes developed over years of fighting the culture wars.

Bawer and Geller initially blamed Muslims for the Norway attacks, as did conservative writers like John Hinderaker and Jennifer Rubin, a conservative columnist for The Washington Post. Last Friday, hours after the attack, Rubin wrote that "there is a specific jihadist connection" to the attacks and that the killings are "a sobering reminder for those who think it's too expensive to wage a war against jihadists."

Rubin had to shift her approach a bit when it turned out that a right-wing extremist was the culprit, but she stuck to her main point:

"There are many more jihadists than blond Norwegians out to kill Americans, and we should keep our eye on the systemic and far more potent threats that stem from an ideological war with the West," she later wrote.

Perhaps the best lesson -- for conservatives and everyone else looking for obvious culprits and easy answers -- came from a Norwegian woman who visited the devastation in Oslo.

"If Islamic people do something bad, you think, `Oh, it's Muslims,'?" Sigrid Skeie Tjensvoll told The Washington Post. "But if a white Protestant does something bad, you just think he's mad. That's something we need to think about."