

Another Media Double Standard

✘ Unless you were studiously not paying attention, you probably know that the man behind the massacre in Norway is a Christian.

According to the Media Research Center, a conservative watchdog organization that monitors such things, “The three major networks trumpeted the news this weekend that the man behind a mass shooting spree in Norway is also a Christian, highlighting the fact in eight different programs from Saturday through Monday.”

A few examples:

From Good Morning America on ABC: “Police have identified the shooter as a 32-year-old Norwegian and Christian fundamentalist,”

From ABC’s World News: “His ideology? Religious conservative. [onscreen shot of his Facebook profile reading ‘Christian.’”

From The Early Show on CBS: “This morning, the man who admits to killing 93 people [later revised downward] in those attacks, saying he wanted to start a revolution to defend traditional Christian values, is in court behind closed doors.”

Several days later the New York Times reported that the gunman’s lawyer believed his client, 32 year-old Anders Behring Breivik, “was a warrior destined to die for the eventual salvation of European Christian values.”

There is no evidence that Breivik belonged to a church, or was religious in any formal way. No evidence either that he believed God or Jesus told him to go out and slaughter his fellow Norwegians. Still, if in some way his religion informed what passes for his thinking – his lawyer says he

believes Breivik is insane – then noting his Christianity is legitimate journalism.

On this I disagree with my friend Bill O'Reilly who says that Christians, by definition, don't murder innocent people, therefore the gunman couldn't possibly be Christian, no matter how he described himself. This is a circular argument. Christians don't kill. Breivik killed. Therefore Breivik is not a Christian. Sorry, it doesn't fly. If it did, there wouldn't be even one killer since Jesus who could rightly be called a Christian.

Beyond this, there is an important media issue at play here; one that involves the hesitancy to introduce another of the world's major religions – Islam – into a story, even when it is clearly relevant. Given the violent history of Islamic radicalism, when a Muslim gunman goes on a shooting spree, there's a good chance his religion had something to do with it – and therefore becomes an important part of the story.

So let's go back to November 2009. A U.S. Army major goes on a killing spree at Fort Hood, Texas. His name is Nidal Malik Hasan. Neither the CBS Evening News nor the NBC Nightly News mentioned Hasan's religion. But ABC World News did. Then anchor Charles Gibson, teased his network's coverage, with this: "Fort Hood tragedy: An Army officer, a Muslim convert, is the suspect in a shooting spree..." And then, leading into his first story, Gibson noted that Major Nidal Malik Hasan, "an army officer, a Muslim, opened fire with handguns..."

And later, after Gibson said that there's "confusion" over whether Hasan was a convert or born a Muslim, ABC News correspondent Brian Ross said that Hasan "attended Damascus University in Syria and may be Jordanian – likely not a convert if that's the case."

Katie Couric, on the other hand, at CBS made no mention of Major Hasan's religion saying only that, "Today, according to

the Army, a soldier opened fire. ... He's identified tonight as Army Major Nadal Malik Hasan, a licensed psychiatrist and drug and rehab specialist from Bethesda, Maryland."

And NBC anchor Brian Williams said: "The soldier, identified as the initial gunman here, is an Army psychiatrist, Nadal Malik Hasan. He's an officer, a Major, and he was apparently armed with two handguns."

And as the Media Research Center reported at the time, "Newsweek's Evan Thomas regretted the Fort Hood mass murderer, Major Nidal Hasan, is a Muslim because of how that reality will be abused by conservatives." On a syndicated weekend television talk show, Inside Washington, Thomas, the resident thinker at Newsweek, said, "I cringe that he's a Muslim. I mean, because it inflames all the fears. I think he's probably just a nut case. But with that label attached to him, it will get the right wing going and it just – I mean these things are tragic, but that makes it much worse."

A few minutes later, Nina Totenberg, one of the many liberal correspondents at NPR, chimed in with this: "It really is tragic that he was a Muslim."

So much concern that a cold-blooded killer was a Muslim, who by the way, carried a business card proclaiming that he was a "soldier of Allah" and who shouted the Islamic battle cry "Allah-O-Akbar!" meaning "God is Great" just before opening fire.

But because he was a Muslim, liberals in the media tiptoed around his religion even when it became obvious that he killed in the name of his religion. Journalists are "sensitive" that way.

No such sensitivity exists in the case of Anders Behring Breivik, whose religion probably played little or no role in the mayhem he caused, and who, to use Evan Thomas' description of Major Hasan, is "probably just a nut case." This was the

headline after the Norway massacre in the New York Times:

“As Horrors Emerge, Norway Charges Christian Extremist.”