

Civil Religion, Mourning and Memorials at Virginia Tech

A Conversation with Jerome Copulsky

BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE
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- Q: As a former faculty member at Virginia Tech, who was on site last year at the time of the shootings, what was your experience in the immediate wake of the shootings? How did the Virginia Tech community respond in the immediate aftermath?
- A: It was a shocking, a horrifying event. Everyone knew someone who was involved. The entire campus, the entire community was affected. The feeling on campus, the absolute horror of what happened on April 16th, and then the trickling in of the details of the shooting, the surreal atmosphere with the media presence, and the arrival on campus of all sorts of religious groups and organizations – it was extremely overwhelming. Yet, one of the things that you felt in those days was a very strong sense of solidarity, of coming together, of mutual support. You saw this in many places and in many ways. It was very palpable; it was very strong, and very powerful.
- Q: What changed when the media descended and with it, the groups from outside of Blacksburg, and outside of Virginia, even?
- A: Well, that was immediate. It was clear that it was no longer an event that was solely about Virginia Tech. It was a significant moment in American history. And the way in which it was experienced on campus was, in many respects, shaped not only by the people who were part of the campus community and the larger Blacksburg community, but also by those who were coming to cover it for the media, to offer their support or to promote their beliefs. So, in a sense there was an atmosphere which was very strongly “Virginia Tech,” so to speak, but very strongly affected by all of the people who were coming to the campus, to cover the event or to proselytize.
- Q: Was there a resistance to what was brought from the outside, or an embracing of that?
- A: Oh, I think the response was mixed. There was definitely a sense of weariness, as the week wore on, regarding the media presence, the media frenzy, the intrusive and in some cases flatly insensitive behavior of some of the journalists, the way in which the Virginia Tech became an object of national—of international—attention and scrutiny. And there also, I should mention, those who came to campus to proselytize, representatives from religious organizations running the gamut from

the Southern Baptist Convention to the Church of Scientology, handing out Bibles and tracts and so forth. It was like being in the center of a storm of evangelism. Then the media left, and the proselytizers left, and we had to go back to the classroom and begin to pick up the pieces.

Q: Today you're talking about the civil religious context of the memorial, and the means of remembering. There seemed to be a very explicit religious content in Seung-Hui Cho's video confession. Is there anything remarkable that we can comment on about that from a religious standpoint?

A: I think I want to make a couple of points about that. The first point is that only part of those materials of Seung-Hui Cho sent to NBC have been released to the public, and there's a controversy about whether any of this material should have been made public at all. The second point is that, in the material that has been broadcast, the "religious dimension" of Cho's self-assertion has been really under-analyzed.

It is clear, from what we have seen of these materials, that Cho was trying to cloak himself in the imagery of religion, specifically Christian imagery. He used the language of suffering, of martyrdom. Of course, it's much easier and maybe more comfortable, to ignore that dimension of Cho's manifesto, to refuse to take it seriously, to consider it simply as the ravings of a madman, his narcissism or self-aggrandizement, than it is to think about what that means, to – to think about why he would resort to that language and that symbolism, to consider the darkness and violence that lies within religion and , within Christianity, itself.

A colleague of mine at Virginia Tech, Matthew Gabriele, who teaches Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Virginia Tech and works on the Crusader period, published an interesting opinion piece in the *Roanoke Times* in which he compares Cho's statements to examples of violent religious rhetoric from the Middle Ages. Cho was appealing to explicitly Christian imagery, saying that he had been mocked and oppressed by evil, decadent forces. He said he was being crucified; that what he was doing he was doing for those who were weak and suffering like him; that he was defending the helpless, the innocent.

Gabriel argued that we should pause over Cho's self-depiction, since the world which he created, in which he saw himself, was created with symbols and ideas which he took from religion. This language of suffering, of martyrdom, or bearing the cross, of doing things for the weak and the innocent, which has been used to justify violence, it's deeply embedded within the Christian theological tradition itself.

Q: Has there been a conversation about that outside of the circle of Seung-Hui Cho? There's a call to recognize the imminent danger enmeshed in this kind of language, and a sort of prophetic challenge to the community from Seung-Hui Cho about the decadence that you mentioned. Surely others have a similar critique – has there been any conversation about what it is the shooter critiqued about society? Or has

that simply been buried in the fact that he was someone we could dismiss as mentally disturbed?

A: Look, I think that there is an understanding that Cho was a severely mentally ill individual who was not well served by the services, the counseling centers that should have been there for him. There were certainly red flags. But I don't think that people are engaging with his "critique" or "prophetic challenge." It certainly would be difficult to do so under the circumstances. Many of his writings that have been released, his plays, for instance, which revel in violent fantasies and obscenities, are just puerile. I suppose that the more interesting question, for those who study religion and society, is why the expression of his grievances—real or imagined—took on this dark religious imagery.

One of the things I'm going to talk about in my presentation is that there was a controversy about how – whether and how – Cho should be remembered. Shortly after the first impromptu memorial on the Drill Field was set up, a student brought a 33rd stone. There were 32 stones, each to memorialize one of the victims, and she brought another stone to the memorial because she believed that, even though he was shooter, the cause of this tragedy, he was part of the community and needed to be remembered. So she brought a 33rd stone. This stone was then removed and then replaced. And this sparked a discussion, a controversy, on campus and in the larger public, in newspaper articles, on talk radio, in the blogosphere – about memorialization and about Cho. How he should be remembered? Should he be included in a memorial? And this controversy had a distantly religious dimension. It raised questions about belonging, about communal responsibility, about evil, about "moral clarity," about forgiveness. Challenging, difficult questions. In the official memorial, dedicated back in August, there are 32 stones, each engraved with the name of one of the victims. But there are other ways in which the "33rd" is being remembered within the Blacksburg community. So that's, I think, an interesting expression of trying to grapple with, trying to understand and in some quarters trying to forgive Seung-Hui Cho.

Q: One of your primary topics for today is the civil religious context of the official memorial itself. Virginia Tech is a public institution and politicians and officials from across the state and from Washington came in for the memorial service itself. Say a bit about what you found notable and challenging, or perhaps uplifting about the ceremony itself.

A: I think that the concept of "civil religion" is useful in trying to understand and analyze ceremonies such as the April 17th convocation. The convocation was set up for the afternoon following the shooting, and it was attended by President George W. Bush and Governor Tim Kaine of Virginia, both of whom spoke. There were also remarks by some of the campus religious leaders, the President of the University, the provost, the Dean of Students, and the poet Nikki Giovanni, among others.

One of the things I want to talk about is the way in which religion was integrated into the convocation. In general, the religious sentiments expressed veered towards the universal. Gov. Kaine made reference to Job's lament and to Jesus' cry on the cross, as an expression of doubt in the face of great suffering. President Bush talked about religious faith as a "source of strength," reminded the audience of the country's prayers and the comfort of a loving God. There were brief remarks from campus religious leaders and representatives from religious organizations—a Muslim, a Buddhist, Jewish and Christian. Their words were, I think one could say, meant to be spiritually inclusive, mindful of and sensitive to the interfaith nature of the event.

Now, in the midst of the ceremony, this inclusiveness, this balance was broken, or challenged, by a shout by someone on the floor, someone who was not an official participant in the event, who called for a recitation the Lord's Prayer. So it was very interesting that there was an official attempt to create an inclusive, non-sectarian, non-denominational atmosphere of reflection and mourning, that was broken or intruded upon by a very sectarian religious moment – a Christian prayer. And when this person – we don't know who he was – called for the Lord's Prayer, people in the audience stood up and started reciting it. But this was not a scheduled moment. I suppose it was, to some, quite natural that this prayer would be offered – they didn't think that it was not part of the presentation – but to others this was an intrusion into the order of the event itself.

Q: At what point in the ceremony did that happen?

A: It happened after the remarks by the campus ministers and representatives of religious groups. The Virginia Tech band played *Amazing Grace* (itself a Christian hymn, of course) – a quiet, reflective musical interlude. At the end of this interlude, before the officials on the podium had the chance to resume the program, someone in the audience shouted, "And now let us pray in the words that Jesus our Savior taught us." And people did. They stood up and recited the prayer. So it was quite natural in the flow of things, I suppose, but from the point of view of the organization of the event it could be considered a breach of decorum.

Q: As a non-Christian, what was your reaction to the moment? It's hard to separate, I imagine, your scholarly role, and your own personal roles, but was it moving to see some people stand up? Was it shocking to see it interrupted with religion?

A: Well, it was surprising. And it was interesting to see this delicate balance broken in such a way. Consider this, for example. The Christian representative, the Lutheran campus minister, gave a homily, which did not mention Christianity or Jesus. It was very Christian, any one who knew the Christian tradition would hear it that way, but he was clearly trying very hard to be as universal as possible, to be sensitive to and speak to the entire Virginia Tech community. (By the way, he met with some very strident criticism for this from some quarters, for not taking the opportunity to "preach the Gospel.") And it was jarring to see that delicate balance

being overridden by this very particularistic prayer, which most of those assembled joined. The general reaction – that people stood up and prayed – was not surprising. But, it's important to remember, some of the victims were not Christian, and Virginia Tech is a public, a state university. I think it's fair to say that this call to prayer had broken with the spirit of the convocation, this non-denominational, interfaith event. It had essentially broken the decorum by introducing an element that marginalized or alienated a number in attendance. And I think that that revealed a tension within such events, events that try to create an atmosphere that is religious but in a very broad fashion, that often they are not religious "enough" for some participants.

The other thing I've mentioned, regarding the religious aspects of the convocation, is the nature of final remarks by Nikki Giovanni. I can talk about that now. Nikki Giovanni is a well-known poet who teaches in the English department at Virginia Tech. [She had Seung-Hui Cho as a student.] At the very end of the convocation she recited a poem which concluded with the words "We are the Hokies. We will prevail. We will prevail. We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech." This speech, its emphasis and the language and the spirit was more geared towards an athletic pep rally than it was to a convocation in response to a shooting, a mass-murder. The students responded with a wave of enthusiastic applause – a spirited response, which culminated in a passionate cheer. "Let's go Hokies, let's go Hokies, let's go Hokies!" It was certainly a "cathartic" moment. The entire mood of the room had completely transformed from a quiet, intense mournfulness to something like jubilation, if one could say that. I suspect that they would call it "Hokie pride." (There was a similar moment at the end of the candle-light vigil that evening; people came together quietly on the Drill Field to mourn and reflect, and then, at the end, bust out in the school cheer.) And it was clear that Giovanni had tapped into this, into the common, and I would dare say, the civic religious language and spirit of the Virginia Tech community.

This is the common language that students and administrators share at Virginia Tech. It's not a language of mourning, it's not a particular denominational religious language; it's the language of the football team. But it is a language that they are used to sharing, a way in which the community is accustomed to coming together. And this was the language that the community – the Virginia Tech community – turned to at the end of this convocation. Apparently, Giovanni's words resonated there. So much so, that not only the students, but the administration, too, appropriated and utilized this language, in its official statements and so on. E-mails from the administration would conclude with the line "We are Hokies. We will prevail" or some such combination from Giovanni's poem. The phrase was displayed on the VT website. And the memorial, the final official memorial – in the center is a stone engraved with the words "We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech." So this message, "We will prevail," became the way that the University tried to control and shape the way in which the community would deal with the aftermath of 4/16.

Now, I don't think there's been a lot of reflection by the administration about whether this sentiment, "we will prevail," is appropriate, but it was the language and the ritual that resonated most powerfully and most – I would say bodily – viscerally with the university community. It was the language they all shared.

Q: Is that language – "we will prevail" – is that part of an ode to the school or something that was previously written, or did she write those words?

A: I hadn't heard it before. I hadn't seen the words "We are Virginia Tech, we will prevail" on t-shirts prior to 4/17. I think it was new. In any event, it was certainly Giovanni's convocation poem which provided the community with this phrase, that roused people to put it on t-shirts, put it on posters and banners. I mean, the expression of this sentiment became one of the ways in which the university community collectively responded to the event. Which on one level makes a lot of sense, as I said. This is the kind of language, that's a common language we have at hand: a language of going forward, of fighting, of overcoming adversary, of victory. But what does it mean to say that? In this context? What does it say when a university only has the language of the football team to work with when it has to understand an event like 4/16?

Q: Well thanks so much for talking.

A: Thank you for having me.

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