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The Fetishization of Christian Martyrdom: A Case Study on Columbine

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Abstract

Martyrdom in Christianity has been extensively researched, but this study examines its fetishization within modern acts of violence, such as school shootings. This paper examines Christians' fantasy of martyrdom in the 1990s and the cultural influence of Columbine shooting victims Rachel Scott and Cassie Bernall. Their influence can be linked to shifts in Christian teen culture. This research contributes to the extant research on the intersections of religion and violence.

Keywords: Columbine, Christianity, Marytrdom

Martyrdom in Early Christianity

In its simplest definition, martyrdom means “a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce a religion” or “a person who sacrifices something of great value and especially life itself for the sake of principle” (Webster, 2023).

Under the second definition, the foundation of Christianity is martyrdom. In the book of Matthew, Jesus Christ is falsely accused of being an anti-government rebel. In Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16, Jesus predicts his death by telling his followers he faces imminent crucifixion. Simultaneously, local religious leaders such as the Jewish Sanhedrin and their authorities plan to arrest Jesus for blasphemy and have him executed by the Roman government. He is betrayed by

his apostle Judas and dies on the cross at the hands of his persecutors. In Galatians 1:4, Jesus also declared that he had to die so sinners could live. In that sense, Jesus was the martyr upon whom Christianity was founded. Martyrdom legitimized itself as an imitation of Jesus's act – self-sacrifice is seen as a way to glorify God (Fabre, 2022).

Martyrdom and persecution are further solidified in the Bible. In Matthew 5:10–12 King James Version, Jesus delivers a sermon saying, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." In this passage, Jesus is honoring his followers for their commitment to him despite being punished for it, legitimizing martyrdom as the prerequisite for great reward in Heaven. Martyrdom is not only self-serving in personal connection to Jesus, as stated here, but can be used to spread religion as a whole (Fabre, 2022).

One of the earliest cases of martyrdom is in the third-century text *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, in which a young woman, under threat of violence and pressure to recant her faith, declares steadfastly that she is a Christian (Augustine & Sherwig, 1976). Because of her faith, she was imprisoned and tortured, claiming it was God's will. Her story made a massive impact on the church, causing the spread of early Christianity as well as the first account of women as prophets.

Contemporary Christian Martyrdom

The first definition of a martyr, as mentioned earlier, implies a conscious choosing of death as opposed to renouncing religion. Under this definition, a martyr should meet three criteria: (1) A commitment to their faith, (2) the refusal to renounce faith, and (3) the conscious choice of death under imminent threat of violence by not renouncing their faith. However, in contemporary Christianity, these characteristics are often not met in accepted martyrs– specifically, the third trait, a conscious choice to die in the spirit of one's faith (Middleton, 2014). Even Christian sects where the process of martyrdom is formalized, such as the Roman Catholic Church, acknowledge martyrs outside of their own defined criteria – Pope John Paul II declared Edith Stein a martyr despite her Jewish heritage (Middleton, 2014).

Martyrs also become enshrined in history as examples of God's righteousness, which can inspire a longing to be martyred. Even within early texts, it is evident martyrdom has been used as an honorary despite some not fitting the definition. For example, Agathonicê, as described in *The Acts of Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonicê* (Publication date debated amongst scholars), witnessed the martyrdom of two Christians and felt compelled to voluntarily submit to martyrdom. Carpus and Papylus were tortured after refusing to sacrifice to the proconsul, and Agathonicê volunteered to follow the same fate (Oxford, n.d.), and all three were honored as martyrdom accounts. *Actes and Monuments,* written in 1563, has been continually updated with similar cases, evidently to legitimize Protestantism as the "correct way of God." (Middleton, 2014). The creation of false martyrs can lead to the manipulation of deaths to further fetishize martyrdom in the name of spreading religion– as is seen in Columbine.

As established earlier, martyrs can be created to legitimize religions and inspire similar behavior, thus strengthening overall faith or similar intention. Subsequently, the *results* of martyrdom (spreading of religion or social impact) can be more important to the religion or specific cause than the legitimacy of the martyr. This leads to figures being "martyred" without meeting the criteria of intention in their deaths. One case is Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old philosophy student who was killed by a stray bullet during Iranian pro-democracy protests in 2009. She had no agenda when she died and she did not declare her faith or political beliefs under threat of violence. Yet despite lacking intention in her death, she was in effect "martyred" because of the impact of her death – she became a key figure in Iranian pro-democracy protests, demonstrating that martyrdom can be used not only for religious purposes but any major cause (Middleton, 2014). Martyrdom, whether for political or religious purposes, can be a powerful tool in spreading faith or another cause.

The Columbine Shooting

On April 20, 1999, 12th-grade students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold conducted a mass shooting and attempted bombing of Columbine High School, killing 13 and injuring 21. Klebold and Harris committed suicide after killing ten students. After the shooting, the journals of both boys were recovered, transcribed by Dr. Peter Langman, detailing their motivation behind the event.

Eric Harris' journal outlines his hatred for the human race. "Society tries to make everyone act the same by burying all human nature and instincts," he writes, adding that the structure of society is not natural and true human nature is anarchy (Langman, 1998, p. 26,008). Throughout the journal, Harris outlines his hatred for humanity as justification for violence. "It has been confirmed, after getting my yearbook and watching people like [redacted] and [redacted], the human race isn't worth fighting for, only worth killing," he writes (Langman, 1998, p. 26,009).

Harris's partner, Dylan Klebold, also maintained journals outlining his desire for violence. However, the tone of his journal is much more self-loathing. Whereas Harris's journal outlines his desire to prove humanity's failures, Klebold writes of his desire to die. "Such a sad desolate lonely unsalvageable I feel I am .. . not fair, NOT FAIR!!! I wanted happiness!!" (Langman, 1998, p. 26,396).

These journals do not indicate a discriminatory pattern of killing to be orchestrated. Instead, as Harris wrote in his journal, the boys orchestrated a massacre targeting all humanity. Journalist Dave Cullen debunks the idea of specific targets in his article for *Slate*, "The Depressed and the Psychopath," (2004) and his book *Columbine* (2010). "When the bombs failed, they shot indiscriminately, firing into open crowds and under tables without bothering to see who their victims were." (Cullen, 2004, p. 4). As outlined in this article, the FBI and its investigative team diagnosed Harris and Klebold as psychopaths. Unlike other school shooters, they concluded that the boys were not angry with the school. Instead, the shooting represented a desire to destroy society. "The school served as means to a grander end, to terrorize the entire nation by attacking a symbol of American life. Their slaughter was aimed at students and teachers, but it was not motivated by resentment of them in particular." (Cullen, 2004, p. 1). Unlike earlier theories, the FBI concluded Harris and Klebold had no intention of singling out members of a single demographic. This means they did not seek to kill Christians or any other demographic specifically.

Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott

Cassie Bernall was born on November 6, 1981. She was raised in an evangelical Christian home but did not reconcile with her faith until in her teenage years. In Misty Bernall's,

Cassie's mother, book, *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*, she outlines Cassie's rebellious era from approximate ages 14-16. Cassie engaged in taking drugs and devil worshipping. At age 15, Bernall found a letter in Cassie's room detailing her desire to kill her parents. The family moved Cassie to a private Christian school due to the letters and, subsequently, to Columbine High School when Cassie's behavior improved. During this tumultuous time for the family, Cassie surrounded herself with Christians and became born-again with her faith (Bernall, 2008, p. 63). "Cassie was so hungry to contribute, to do something creative, to give." wrote Cassie's youth pastor (Bernall, 2008, p. 77).

Cassie was killed in the library during the Columbine shooting. After her death, eyewitness accounts emerged that, preceding her death, Eric Harris asked Cassie if she believed in God. Allegedly, it was not until Cassie responded affirmatively that he shot the fatal bullet into her head. However, investigations revealed that this confrontation was a myth. The abovementioned exchange actually occurred between Harris and another girl, Valerie Schnurr,who survived the shooting. (Cullen, 2004, p. 5). Despite the truth, word had already spread of Cassie's purported martyrdom.

Rachel Scott was born in August 1982, and grew up a devout Christian her entire childhood. When she began high school at Columbine, Rachel's friends began to distance themselves from her due to her faith. In a letter before her death, Rachel writes, "Now that I have begun to walk my talk, they make fun of me. I don't even know what I have done. I don't even have to say anything, and they turn me away... But you know what, it's all worth it." (Nimmo and Scott, 2000, p. 96).

According to the Rachel Scott website, dedicated to her life and legacy, she often contacted classmates to help facilitate their faith. "I want to reach out to those with special needs because they are often overlooked. I want to reach out to those who are new in school because they don't have any friends yet." (Scott, n.d). Rachel aspired to be a Christian missionary at the time of her death. In an interview, Rachel's brother Craig Scott claims she offered prayer to one of the future Columbine shooters. Rachel was killed on the lawn outside of the school while she was eating lunch. During the shooting, parallel to Cassie's story, Rachel was asked, "You still believe in God now?" Allegedly, when she responded affirmatively, she was shot and killed.

There is no evidence supporting she knew the outcome of her answer, and again, the shooters did not choose targets discriminately– Rachel could have been shot regardless of her answer.

Bernall and Scott's Martyrdom

Post-Columbine, certain sects of Christian culture glorified Bernall and Scott's individual stories as martyrs. During Rachel's funeral, pastor Barry Palster characterized Rachel as "one who has given [her] life for the Lord Jesus Christ, a modern-day martyr." (Watson, 2002, p. 52). Pastor Bruce Porter said Rachel was a "warrior" who carried "a torch that was stained by the blood of the martyrs from the very first day of the Church's existence" (Watson, 2002, p. 53). He urged attendees to pick up that metaphorical torch, implying that his congregants should be willing to meet the same fate as Rachel. Following the funeral, Rachel's story was used by these pastors (e.g., Porter wrote a book about her) and family members to spread God's word, specifically on ideals of sacrifice. Rachel's family created a nonprofit in her name, Rachel's Challenge, which aims to "break down the walls that lead to harassment, isolation, teen suicide, and gun violence." (Scott, n.d). Darrell Scott, Rachel's father, was awarded the "Friend of Education Award" for the foundation in 2006. Craig Scott was invited to the White House to speak on gun violence on Rachel's behalf and Darrell Scott has written about Rachel's life in multiple books.

I'm Not Ashamed, a 2016 film, was made to honor Rachel's commitment to God and the conditions of her death, which the film emphasizes are a result of her faith. The film was disparaged in reviews for "glorifying Columbine" and pushing a Christian agenda, and received a 20% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. However, within Christian circles, Rachel's story was lauded as a powerful story of martyrdom, resembling the story of Jesus Christ. One blog wrote, "Rachel's life is a powerful testimony to the wonderful ways that God uses those who love Him. Her life was only 17 years long, but God has taken her legacy and touched millions." (Lamm, 2018).

Cassie Bernall's story, beyond the previously referenced biography, was also immortalized within popular culture. In 1999, Micheal W. Smith's song "This is Your Time" commemorated Cassie as its central concept, which later won a Dove Award– a ceremony for gospel music. "She lived every moment / Left nothing to chance / Embraced the mystery / Of all

she could be," read the lyrics. These lyrics likely are referring to Cassie's death "embracing the mystery of all she could" through her answer to Harris and her subsequent death– she embraced the mystery of death and Heaven by answering "yes." Smith subsequently wrote a book about Cassie inspiring his faith and those who "stood for death" before Christ. The Christian metal rock band Flyleaf wrote a song about her story, called "Cassie." "To remember her last sentence / She answered him knowing what would happen / Her last words still hanging in the air" read the lyrics. These lines reference Cassie's widespread fame after her death, especially the mourning by Christian teens across the country. At a 1999 evangelical rally, 73,000 teens came to hear sermons based on Cassie, and wept along with the sermons (Bottum, 1999). President of the evangelical Fuller Seminary, Richard Mouw, compared Cassie to St. Eulalia, a 13-year-old Roman Christian who was martyred in Barcelona during the persecution of Christians in the reign of emperor Diocletian. Robin Darling Young, a patristics scholar at Catholic University, likened her to Catherine of Alexandria (a Christian saint martyred in the early fourth century), Crispina (martyr of Africa who suffered during the Diocletian persecution), and Rhipsime (martyr who was put to death with a group of fellow virgins in Armenia) (Bottum, 1999).

In a 2015 Republican debate, Rick Santorum brought up Cassie's influence post-Columbine. "Sixteen years ago this country was tremendously inspired by a young woman who faced a gunman in Columbine and was challenged about her faith and she refused to deny God. We saw her as a hero." (Washington Post Staff, 2015). One pastor wrote, "Cassie is a HERO, and I rejoice because of her confession. As a pastor, I pray my flock would make such a confession." (Holland, 2016). As was with Rachel, there is no evidence that Cassie knew what her answer to the shooters would mean. In a since-deleted website dedicated to the life and martyrdom of Cassie Bernall, visitors were encouraged to follow her lead, the website reading, "Are you willing to take a stand for God today?'" (Waxman, 2003). The girls became heroes and martyrs, despite evidence proving otherwise.

Pre-Columbine Christian Teen Culture

In the late 1980s to early 1990s, Christian teen culture was dominated by purity culture, such as True Love Waits rallies and Promise Keepers events, which garnered attendances of over 25,000

teens (Fernandes, 2014). These rallies were delivered on college campuses and at youth ministries, asking teens to sign commitments to their faith and take abstinence pledges. These abstinence pledges were largely a result of fear of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and served as a cultural counterweight to the more permissive ideas associated with third-wave feminism (Fernandes, 2014).

Throughout this movement, from 1990-1998, the number of Christian-affiliated people between the ages of 18-35 declined by 14%, according to the General Social Survey (as seen in Figure 1). The graph then shows a slight increase in 1999 and further declining rates afterward. The 1999 increase immediately follows the Columbine shooting, and the trending decline continues in the years after. The red line in the graph indicates rates of non-religious affiliation. It could be suggested that this demographic found solace in the tragedy of Columbine in religion.

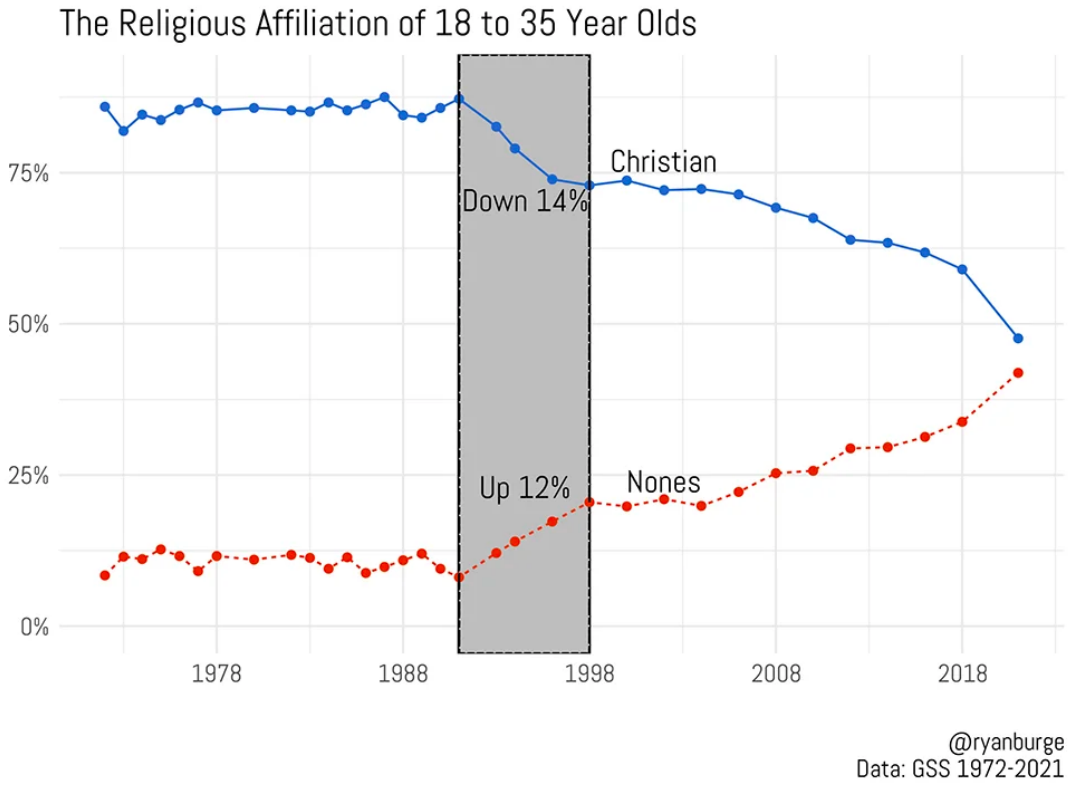

Figure 1: Declining Christian Youth from 1990 to 1998 (Burge, 2021)

Post-Columbine Christian Teen Culture Shift and Martyrdom Expression

Post-Columbine, Cassie and Rachel's stories became widespread, as previously established. In the years following, Christian popular culture shifted its approach to teens from purity-based movements to themes of martyrdom and sacrifice. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' *Left Behind* series depicted the Rapture, an eschatological position some evangelicals hold in which true followers of Christ are brought to Heaven from Earth. In the novels, the people "left behind" battle the Antichrist as they become born-again Christians. They are then persecuted by government officials and forced to operate underground. The first installment of the series was published in 1995, though it did not reach the bestselling list until 2000 (immediately post-Columbine) with installments 7 and 8 - and number 10 debuted at the #1 spot (New York Times Staff, 2000). The born-again Christians resembled martyrs as they risked everything for their faith– glorifying violence and subsequent martyrdom, especially to their teenage audience. This can be linked to the growing fetishization of martyrdom in the wake of the popularity of Cassie and Rachel's stories.

Similar work was disseminated into popular culture more broadly. The 2014 film *God's Not Dead* follows a philosophy professor who forces his students to sign a "God is dead" declaration to pass. Student Josh Wheaton is the sole student refusing to sign the slip and is invited to debate the professor. Throughout the debates, Wheaton becomes alienated from his classmates and is broken up with by his girlfriend. In the final debate, Wheaton garners support, and the students leave in protest, many converting to Christianity. Wheaton parallels the martyr's journey– instead of dying for the faith, he risks his academic performance to do so. The movie ends with the professor dying and a performance of a song titled the same as the film. Although it was an outlier for a secular audience, the movie performed well at the box office, garnering $9.2 million in its first weekend. However, it was criticized by both evangelicals and non-evangelicals for stereotyping and caricaturing (Gerson, 2014).

These approaches seemed to have some effect on Christian teenagers. After Rachel's death and subsequent popular culture shifts, journalist Hanna Rosin for the Washington Post found a phenomenon of obsession with martyrdom within Christian teens. "God has laid it on my heart that I'm going to be martyred," a teenager named Tina Leonard told a Southern Baptist

news service, Rosin reported. “When I told one of my friends, he said, ‘That’s awesome. I wish it could happen to me.'” (Rosin, 1999). By positioning martyrs as protagonists and heroes to be envied, Post-Columbine teen Christian culture fetishizes the idea of suffering in the name of God.

Potential Implications

Current Pew Research Center statistics indicate Christianity, despite the slight bump in affiliation after Columbine, has decreased rapidly since the 2000s (PEW, 2022). Aligning martyrdom and a willingness to give life for faith can alienate youth. Further, the myth of suffering is just that: a myth. Even within the case of the Columbine High School massacre, it was established by the FBI and all other governing bodies that Rachel Scott and Cassie Bernall were *not* targeted as Christians. Broadly describing Christians in the United States as targeted, persecuted, or harmed in any way would be inaccurate, yet the narrative shaping Columbine and ideas after it perpetuates this false belief. A 2019 PRRI research study showed white American Evangelical Christians believed they were persecuted more often than Muslims, which is markedly false (Cox & Jones, 2017.) Christians experience the second-lowest percentage of religious hate crimes in the country, and only one-tenth of the number of Anti-Semetic hate crimes (DOJ, 2023). There are also no laws that either explicitly or implicitly discriminate against Christians. Furthering the idea that Christians are persecuted in the West and fetishizing martyrdom is ignorant to real discrimination occurring throughout the country. Christianity should not have to fetishize martyrdom to flourish, especially in instances like Columbine, where Cassie and Rachel likely had no idea what their answer would mean in the face of death. The glorification of these girls’ deaths only furthers the idea that dying for faith is noble and should be repeated. Creating a longing for martyrdom and persecution within teens fetishizes suffering and dying in the name of Christ, and potentially motivates martyr-seeking suicides. Based on the evidence presented by leading authorities, Cassie and Rachel were just girls– tragedy can just be tragedy without being ascribed to a higher purpose.

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