

## **Murder, Suicide and Self-Divinization in the Media Age**

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### **Introduction: Fifteen Minutes of Fame**

As I began to write this paper, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the mass murder at Columbine High School in Colorado has come and gone. In the months preceding, there was a spate of killings. One of the most remarkable shootings happened on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, when seventeen-year old Tim Kretschmer<sup>1</sup> murdered fifteen people, mostly students at the Albertville Secondary School in Winnenden, Germany. After the massacre, he committed suicide.<sup>2</sup> Kretschmer, who was described in the media as “quiet and inconspicuous,”<sup>3</sup> received global attention and his “fifteen minutes of ‘fame.’”

Since the most notorious shooters have been known to write diaries, create websites, where they detail their real and perceived grievances as well as film videos of themselves ranting and raving about their future crimes, an explanation for the crimes can be found in what seems to be the perpetrators’ fanatical desire for attention, but also the worldview that supports their need for it. For many of the shooters, fame or better infamy has become a substitute for immortality, causing them to perceive their violent death or willingness to die in a barrage of gunfire as a form of self-divinization. Furthermore, the young shooters’ too frequent self-identification with ‘God’ or ‘a god,’ and their desire to attract followers, implies that their violence has – to some extent -- a religious connotation.

The fact that some of the shooters understood their deeds as a sacrifice<sup>4</sup> and even perceived themselves to be ‘victims’ of society, coupled with their belief that the experience of their own murder, i.e. “suicide by cop,”<sup>5</sup> would ‘divinize’ them implies that the pharmeketical process of the scapegoating mechanism was active in the planning and execution of their crimes. Hence, placing the shootings within the framework of Girard’s scapegoat theory can help to understand the actual motivations of the shooters and, by extension, other acts of terrorism.

### ***A Brief Summary of René Girard’s theory of Pagan Divinization***

Now we will attempt to understand school shootings within the framework of Girard’s theory.

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<sup>1</sup> “Teenage Gunman Kills 15 at School in Germany,” New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/europe/12germany.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Kretschmer, Last Moments, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUwFP1OsEnU>.

<sup>3</sup> “Teenage Gunman Kills 15 at School in Germany,” New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/europe/12germany.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Lieberman, *School Shootings* (New York: Kensington Publishing, 2006, 2008) 6. Dylan Klebold’s diary drawings were clearly sacrificial.

<sup>5</sup> Lieberman, *School Shootings*, 18-19, 137-139.

### ***School Shootings***

Concerning Girard's belief that religion began with a mimetic crisis, I take it as a given that our western civilization is in an extreme and vast mimetic crisis or a crisis of violent imitation. Our diverse and plural western civilization seems to be pulling apart at the seams. The events that unfolded at Columbine High School on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, 1999 in many ways mirror the growing level of random violence in western culture. Columbine became the benchmark from which to measure other shootings, but also the model which other shooters have attempted to imitate and surpass. In fact, many later shooters often admit to Columbine imitation and mention Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as their 'models' or 'heroes' in their final video addresses and suicide notes.<sup>6</sup> Although Columbine represented something new; nevertheless, it too modeled another home-grown terrorist activity, namely, the Oklahoma City Bombing. This bombing occurred on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, 1995 and received extensive media coverage, lasting for years. Furthermore, in the apocalyptic destruction that the perpetrators hoped to create, they also sought to commemorate the birthday of Adolf Hitler, whom Harris admired.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Selection of the Victims and Unification of Communities***

An important element of the scapegoating process concerns the selection of the scapegoated victim. In school shootings, this appears to occur in two different ways: by the auto-selection of perpetrators *a priori* and by the media *a posteriori*.

### ***A Priori Selection***

According to Girard, in the primitive situation, the victim was selected by the community due to some distinguishing characteristic or weakness, for example, a birthmark or limp, during the course of the abovementioned mimetic crisis. Only later, after the victim had been murdered and the guilt of the community had set in, was the victim divinized. In the case of school shootings, however, selection is not carried out by the community, but by the perpetrators themselves, based on what they consider to be the personal characteristics that make them 'different,' or as we will see, a 'superior victim.' This is because the perpetrators often aspire to become omnipotent divinities *before* their deaths, and attempt to find ways to distinguish themselves from the rest of the crowd, or even humanity. They do this, not by playing up their distinctive weaknesses, but by emphasizing their illusory superiority. In their videos, they brandish weapons that make the film legend Rambo look docile in comparison,

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<sup>6</sup> In Denver Times, "Media's Columbine coverage gave killers the infamy they craved," <http://www.indenvertimes.com/2009/04/20/medias-columbine-coverage-gave-killers-the-infamy-they-craved/>.

<sup>7</sup> Lieberman, *School Shootings*, 174.

while encouraging others to follow in their footsteps.<sup>8</sup> Since their exploits often end in suicide or attempted suicide, by establishing their hypothetical superiority, they not only engage in a process of the mythologization of themselves (self-mythologization), but also in a process of what I call ‘auto-selection.’ As is clear, unlike the timeframe when mythologization took place in the ancient situation, occurring after the death of the victim, here, the perpetrators set themselves up to become their own victims.

On that fateful morning, Eric Harris (18) and Dylan Klebold (17), with only a few weeks to go before graduation, and after more than a year of preparation, walked into their school with various semi-automatic weapons, knives and home-made bombs. In the mayhem that followed, they murdered twelve students, one teacher and wounded twenty-seven others. Forty-five minutes after they entered the school, they committed suicide.<sup>9</sup>

From their diaries and videos of themselves preparing the attack, it is now possible to see how the process of auto-selection took place. On the day of the shooting, Harris in fact wore a t-shirt with *Natural Selection* printed on it. Harris’ understanding of natural selection was based on neo-Nazi ideological social Darwinism that had little to do with the scientific theory of evolution. In his diaries, he wrote about the need to kill anyone, whom he deemed abnormal or weak, and even provided a list of traits.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in one of his last diary entries, he lamented about feeling excluded, because he looked different or weird.<sup>11</sup> Harris was born with a concave chest and, true to a boy who is not yet beyond puberty, felt insecure about it. He hated how he looked and admitted that he picked on people, who looked like himself. He believed that his hatred for others originated in his hatred of himself.<sup>12</sup>

Klebold made similar distinguishing or auto-selective statements about himself.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Klebold considered that his perceived “difference” to be on an incomparably grander scale than his classmates. Their existence was shallow, because they did not know the “world beyond,” a world that he claimed he had experienced in and through his mind. Thanks to his esoteric experiences, he believed that he lacked their human nature, while they lacked his

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<sup>8</sup> Peter F. Langman, *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 94-95; 17; 41-44, 145; 50-58. For example, Seung Hui Cho (23), the perpetrator of the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, sent a “multimedia manifesto” to NBC hoping that it would become the basis of a movie about his life. Some of them even compare themselves to Moses or Jesus, as did Seung Hui Cho, or may even claim to be God or Zeus, as did Eric Harris (18) and Dylan Klebold (17), the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre.

<sup>9</sup> Jerald J. Block, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 31-32; Jefferson County Sheriff Office (JCSO). “CD containing 936 pages of documents seized from the Harris and Klebold residence/vehicles.” JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026004. Available at: <http://denver.rockymountainnews.com/pdf/900columbinedocs.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026018.

<sup>12</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026014.

<sup>13</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026416. “I know that I am different, yet I am afraid to tell the society. The possible abandonment, persecution is not something I want to face.”



it unified resentful non-Christians, who felt that Christians were unjustifiably making themselves into victims.<sup>19</sup>

From police records and other documents, however, it has now become clear that neither Dylan Klebold nor Eric Harris were really ever bullied or humiliated, except in their own pubescent minds. In fact, they were themselves bullies and shot no one on their so-called 'hit list.' Not only was Harris a good student, but he was also a good soccer player. Harris' bullying at the hands of 'jocks,' therefore, seems to have had more to do with Harris' envy and desire to be a 'top jock' than with any actual experience of humiliation. Moreover, it has been shown that in the case of Cassie Bernall (a girl who supposedly replied positively to the question that she believed in God and was shot for her Christian beliefs),<sup>20</sup> was a case of mistaken identity with Valeen Schnurr, whose life in fact Klebold spared. It seems that the boys' victims were chosen randomly or 'unselectively,' undermining most revenge theories.

Furthermore, the boys were not deprived and came from well educated, upper middle class families that most people would consider good, stable homes, where neither violence, racism nor anti-Semitism were propagated. In a country where millions have easy access to weapons, the Klebolds, half Jewish, apparently only owned a BB gun.<sup>21</sup> The popular belief that they came from bad or even underprivileged homes is unfounded.<sup>22</sup> The most troubling fact about these seemingly 'normal' teenagers is that they actually did not intend to target particular enemies at all, but had targeted humanity as such, hoping to become the leaders or models of an apocalyptic revolution of other disaffected self-aggrandizing teens.<sup>23</sup> They even fantasized about crashing a plane in New York City, two years before September 11, revealing how the mind-set of these juvenile school shooters is closely related to that of other suicide terrorists.<sup>24</sup>

The perpetrators were filled with rage and hatred, not necessarily against any particular person, race, religion or gender, but against the world as well as themselves.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Ralph W. Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> See Misty Bernall, *She said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* (Rifton, New York: Plough Publishing, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> "Burying a Killer," *Christian Century*, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_15\\_116/ai\\_54700214/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_15_116/ai_54700214/).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/29/us/shattered-lives-special-report-caring-parents-no-answers-columbine-killers-pasts.html?sec=&spon=&scp=2&sq=susan%20vassenoff&st=cse&pagewanted=4>.

<sup>23</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 020011. "I have realized that Yes, the human race is still indeed doomed. It just needs a few kick starts, like me, and hell, maybe even (blank). If I can whipe a few cities off the map, and even the f\*\*\*head holding the map, then great, hmmm, just thinking if I want ALL humans dead or maybe just the quote-unquote 'civilized developed and known of' places on Earth..."

<sup>24</sup> Block, "Lessons from Columbine," 1. (See link above).

<sup>25</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026007. "Try it sometime if you think you are worthy, which you probly will you little shits, drop all your beliefs and your and ideas that have been burned into your head and try to think about why your here, but I bet most of you f.... cant even think that deep, so that is why you must die. How dare you think that I and you are part of the same species when we are soooooo different. You arent human, you are a robot. You don't take advantage of your

Instead of placing blame on one victim, the shooters placed blame on everyone. For example, addressing his diary entry to the ‘survivors’ of his apocalyptic mass murder, Harris wrote:

If you recall your history the Nazis came up with a ‘final solution’ to the Jewish problem. Kill them all. Well in case you haven’t figured it out yet, I say ‘KILL MANKIND.’ No one should survive. We all live in lies.<sup>26</sup>

Although there are no easy answers, one thing that most of the killers seem to have in common is their obsession with violent virtual reality games. Dr. Jerald J. Block, who writes against admitting a direct link between violent computer games and children’s behavior, nevertheless, admits that the thousands of hours that the perpetrators spent behind the screen playing games that simulate mass annihilation somehow “changed” them or at least their way of thinking.<sup>27</sup> Children, who are obsessed with games, become immersed into its virtual reality and start to integrate the games’ primitive narratives into their way of thinking, blending the virtual with the real. For example, Eric Harris became so obsessed with the game ‘Doom’ that he wrote: “Doom is so burned into my head my thoughts usually have something to do with the game. ... What I cant do in real life, I try to do in doom.”<sup>28</sup> Doom<sup>29</sup> is a “first-person shooter” (FPS) game that introduces the gamer into an imaginary world that strongly resembles a Hobbesian state of nature, that is, a war of all against all. In the game, the layers of reality, fantasy reality and virtual reality are stacked together like a set of Russian Matryushka dolls,<sup>30</sup> so that not only the main character, but also the reader is unable to easily distinguish between the fantastical real from the virtual. The actual existence of a ‘real’ reality is not only put into question by the plot of the stories, but also by the nature of the relationship of the “Doom novels” to the virtual framework in which the ‘Doom’ games are constructed. For the obsessed gamer, ‘reality’ is merely another aspect of his fantastical projection. This might explain why Harris began to think that “we all live in lies.”

### ***Panentheropic Worldview***

In his book *Sources of the Self*, which to an extent is a refutation of what he calls the “naturalist temper” that permeates western culture,<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor makes a good argument that our metaphysical vision, or understanding of reality, determines our moral actions in

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capabilities given to you at birth, you just drop them and hop onto the boat and head down the stream of life with all the other f... of your type. Well g..damit I wont be a part of it! I have thought to much, realized to much, found out to much, and I am to self aware to just stop what I am thinking and go back to society because what I do and think isn’t ‘right’ or ‘morally accepted! NO, NO, NO, g. f... damit NO! I will sooner die than betray my own thoughts, but before I leave this worthless place, I will kill whoever I deem unfit for anything at all. Especially life. And if you pissed me off in the past, you will die if I see you, because you might be able to piss off others....”

<sup>26</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026010.

<sup>27</sup> Block, “Lessons from Columbine: Virtual and Real Rage,” 9-12.

<sup>28</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026189 8.

<sup>29</sup> Wikiagaming, “Doom Wikia,” <http://doom.wikia.com/wiki/Entryway>.

<sup>30</sup> Wikia Gaming, “Doom Wikia,” [http://doom.wikia.com/wiki/Doom\\_novels](http://doom.wikia.com/wiki/Doom_novels).

<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 78.

society.<sup>32</sup> Taylor's arguments are significant since many of the shooters claim -- despite their rejection of objective reality -- to be following 'nature.'<sup>33</sup> Although it's difficult to say to what extent the shooters actually read or understood their philosophies, in one of his last diary entries, a few months before the Columbine attack, Eric Harris wrote that he loved Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Hobbes,<sup>34</sup> two philosophers whose worldviews and moral understandings were decidedly naturalistic, whom Harris had learned about in a high school philosophy class. As most are aware, Hobbes posited that in the 'state of nature,' a state he imagines without man-made institutions, there would be a permanent state of "war of all against all (*Bellum omnium contra omnes*)."<sup>35</sup> Harris would have virtually experienced the Hobbesian state through his obsession with the game 'Doom.'

First, it is important to emphatically state that there is no causal link between the shootings and learning about Hobbes and Nietzsche in a high school philosophy class; nevertheless, I would contend that the shooters' juvenile confrontation with these philosophers, coupled with their obsession with violent video games that simulate a virtual Hobbesian state of nature, might have provided a rationale or justification for disparaging societal rules and norms as well as reality as such in order to execute their pubescent rage and envy on their peers. For Harris, objective reality had become an illusion.<sup>36</sup> He believed that the Earth should be given back to the animals<sup>37</sup> and longed for the elimination of all laws, rules, obligations so that so-called 'human nature' could take over and destroy itself, leaving only the fittest to reshape the world.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly Klebold began to question the veracity of objective reality. In one entry, he writes: "My existence is shit to me – how I feel then. I'm in eternal suffering. In infinite

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<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59, 71, 84, 92.

<sup>33</sup> For example, see JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026015.

<sup>34</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026017.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, revised student edition, 1991) 88-90. See also Hobbes, *De Cive* as well as Friedrich Nietzsche, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne," in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999) 877.

<sup>36</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026845. According to Harris: "Lots of the rooms and levels in this place came directly from my imagination.- So you are basically running around in my own world. I live in this place. I mean a person could write a freakin' book on all the symbolism and double meanings used in these levels..."

<sup>37</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026009.

<sup>38</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 06008. "Society may not realize what is happening, but I have; you go to school, to get used to studying and learning how youre 'supposed to' so that draws or filters out a little bit of human nature, but that's after your parents taught you whats right and wrong even though you may think differently, you still must follow the rules. After school you are expected to get a job or go to college, to have more of your human nature blown out your ass. Society tries to make everyone act the same by burying all human nature and instincts. That's what school, laws, jobs, and parents do. If they realize it or not and then, the few who stick to their natural instincts are casted out as psychos or lunatics or strangers or just plain different. Crazy, strange, weird, wild, these words are not bad or degrading. If humans were let to live how we would naturally it would be chaos and anarchy and the human race wouldn't probably last that long, but hey guess what, that's how its supposed to be!!! Society and government are only created to have order and calmness, which is exactly the opposite of pure human nature."

directions in infinite realities – yet these realities are fake...”<sup>39</sup> Klebold entitled the front page of his diary: “A Virtual Book: Existences.” In this book/diary, he claimed that he is going to discuss existence as he understands it. Although he believed that reality is infinite (e.g. infinite worlds), it is an illusion that has been induced by thought.<sup>40</sup> In another place, he says that he seeks the knowledge of the unthinkable and explores “the everything” -- which is probably his synonym for ‘the All’ -- through the use of his mind. He claimed that no physical boundaries block his exploration, “through time and dimensions. ... the everything is his realm.” By experiencing what he considered to be “the everything,” he came to the conclusion that not only is everything “connected yet separate,” but also cyclical.<sup>41</sup> For Klebold, the totality of reality is a holistic, eternal cycle of creation and destruction, light and dark, good and evil, etc.<sup>42</sup> Reality is a continual pendulum swing between oppositional states, which he believes is replicated in the weather<sup>43</sup> or nature.

He began to refer to his phenomenal self in the third person. He wonders how the “body of Dylan” had become “covered” by an “entity,” which seemed to have enveloped him. This experience of dissociation or depersonalization could be explained by the fact that Klebold seems to have had some type of out-of-body experiences, which gave him the impression that his mind was separated from his body or that his mind was manipulating his body from a distance.<sup>44</sup> Klebold’s writings also exhibit a strong tendency towards solipsism. In another section, he says that the one, who truly exists (“the true existor”), “lives in solitude, always aware, always infinite, always looking for, his love.” His growing solipsism could

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<sup>39</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026388. In another place Klebold writes: “god I HATE my life, i want to die really bad right now – Let’s see what i have that’s good: a nice family – a good house, food, a couple of good friends, & possessions, what’s bad – no girls (friends or girlfriends), no other friends except a few, nobody accepting me even though i want to be accepted, me doing badly & doing badly in any & all sports, me looking weird & acting shy – BIG problem, me getting bad grades, having no ambition of life, that’s the big shit....”

<sup>40</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026388.

<sup>41</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026391.

<sup>42</sup> See JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026397- “.... The everything contrast ... Dark. Light. God. Lucifer. Heaven. Hell. Good. BAD. Yes, the everlasting contrast. Since existence has known the ‘fight’ between good evil has continued. Obviously, this fight can never end. Good things turn bad, bad things become good, the ‘people’ on the earth see it as a battle they can win. HA Fuckin’ morons. If people looked at History, they would see what happens. I think, too much, I understand, I am God compared to some of these inexistent brainless zombies. Yet, the actions of them interest me, (difficult to read). Another contrast, more of a paradox, actually, like the advanced go far the undevelopds realms while some of the morons become everything dwellers – but, exceptions to every rule & this is a BIG exception – most morons never change. They never decide to live in the ‘everything’ frame of mind!”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>43</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026415.

<sup>44</sup> See JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026393. “Hypnosis place – It is a sky – with one large cloud, & sort of a cloud made chair – the sun is at the head of the chair. 10 o’clock points the sky .. Below, I sometimes see myself, & the green (... Green) earth – sorta a city, yet I hear nothing. I rest on this chair – actually like a chaise & I am talking to what? I don’t know it’s just there, I have the feeling that I know him, even though I consciously don’t ... we talk like we are the same person – like he’s my soul.” See also: JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026392.

In another place he writes: “After this so called ‘lecture’ the common man feels confused, empty & unaware. Yet. Those are the best emotions of a ponderer. The real difference is, a true ponderer will explore these emotions & what caused them. Miles & miles of never-ending grass, like a wheat. A farm, sunshine, a happy feeling in the presence, Absolutely nothing wrong, nothing even is contrary 180° to normal life. No awareness, just pure bliss, unexplainable bliss. The only challenges are no challenge, then ... BAM!!! Realization sets in, the world is the greatest punishment. Life.”

have led Klebold to believe that reality was constructed by his own thoughts.<sup>45</sup> In a rather Gnostic fashion, he despised physical existence and longed to die, specifically mentioning suicide as an answer.<sup>46</sup> He imagined death as an escape or release that would allow him to go on living in his own thoughts.

Like one of his games, Klebold imagined that existence was one long hallway with various doors. After one existence or life was ended, one just walked through the door into another existence.<sup>47</sup> Because he experienced life as hell on Earth, he longed for a Gnostic release. Although he claimed to hate the thought of it, going on a killing spree might allow him to “break free.”<sup>48</sup> Thereafter, he could live in a peaceful room in his own mind, in a condition of divinity.<sup>49</sup> Klebold also interpreted his murderous acts as some type of a sacrifice. For example, he drew repetitive double and triple crosses (11 times), a sacrificial symbol, throughout his diaries, even though the boys disparaged Jesus of Nazareth as a weakling. On one of his first repetitive crosses, in the middle of the horizontal axis, Klebold drew four concentric boxes, which he entitled “Existence.” Inside of the boxes, he wrote the word, “Me,” symbolizing his own suffering and perhaps, given the fact that he was permanently contemplating suicide, his anticipation of his death as his sacrifice of himself.<sup>50</sup>

Klebold’s diary suggests that he had adopted a metaphysical position called *panpsychism*, meaning: All is thought or mind. Panpsychism is a more holistic or monistic philosophical paradigm of reality that envisions nature not only as alive and sympathetic, but also to varying degrees conscious.<sup>51</sup> More significantly, Klebold seemed to have adopted a strange philosophical panpsychic disposition that is often found in occult thinkers called

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<sup>45</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026392. “Yet I, who is more mentally open to anything, see my 3 dimensions, my realm of thought - Time, Space THOUGHT. Thought is the most powerful thing that exists – anything conceivable can be produced, anything everything is possible, even in your physical world.”

<sup>46</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026389.

<sup>47</sup> See for example, JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026391. “Existence is a great hall, life is one of the rooms, death is passing thru the doors, & the ever-existent compulsion of everything is the curiosity to keep moving down the hall, thru the doors, exploring rooms, down this never-ending hall.” And, JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026399. “Peace might be the ultimate destination ... destination unknown.... I want happiness ... abandonment is present for the martyr. My thoughts exist in, want to live in. I want to find a room in the great hall & stay there w my love & never.”

<sup>48</sup> See JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026415.

<sup>49</sup> See JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026412. “I understand that I can never ever be a zombie, even if I wanted to. The nature of my entity. Soon we will live in the **halcyons** of our minds, the one thing that made me a god.”

<sup>50</sup> “The Downward Spiral,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Downward\\_Spiral](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Downward_Spiral).

<sup>51</sup> See Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 275-276. Blackburn describes panpsychism in a way that is both quite similar to ancient animism and New Age holism. Panpsychism is “either the view that all parts of matter involve consciousness, or the more holistic view that the whole world ‘is but the veil of an infinite realm of mental life’ (Lotze). The world, or nature, produce living creatures, and accordingly ought to be thought of itself an alive and animated organism, literally describable as possessing reason, emotion, and a ‘world-soul.’ The view that man is a microcosm, or small version of the cosmos, which can therefore be understood in anthropomorphic terms, is a staple theme in Greek philosophy. It passed into the medieval period via Neoplatonism, and became shared by Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Schelling, and many others. Its most intelligible modern version is perhaps the view that for environmental reasons we do well to think as if the world is a complex organism (sometimes rather preciously called Gaia), whose unity is as fragile as that of any living thing.”

*panenanthropism*, literally meaning: the All is in the person. Within panpsychic philosophical monism, panenanthropism occurs when the thinker intellectually subsumes the cosmos into his own mind<sup>52</sup> and begins to believe that he is literally the incarnation of the ‘Mind of God,’ directing the course of the world through his own thoughts. Should Klebold’s metaphysical outlook have been panpsychic, i.e. all is thought, and panenanthropic, i.e. all is himself, in order to become godlike, he possibly felt like he needed to experience what he understood to be “the everything,” which might also include murder. Since he began to believe that these experiences were generated by his creative mind, in his mind, murder of others would have no objective reality and, from his mentalist perspective, no real actual moral significance. Harris similarly expressed panenanthropic thoughts.<sup>53</sup>

### **Suicidal Self-Divinization**

After reading more about Harris and Klebold, the question remains, “why would two bright boys, who had most of their productive years before them, aspire to become infamous mass murderers?” Perhaps their deeds can be partially understood by placing them within the context of the modern spiritual search for meaning in a culture that claims that “God is Dead.” The philosopher Charles Taylor is insightful here. He says that the “modern aspiration for meaning ... has obvious affinities with longer-standing aspirations to higher being, to immortality.” As he points out, the modern longing for immortality has taken various forms. One of the typical ways that it expresses itself is in the aspiration to fame,<sup>54</sup> or in the case of school shooters, for infamy. For example, in a 2006 survey for National Kid’s Day in England, 2500 children under ten years of age revealed that being famous would be “the best thing in the world.” Having “good looks” and “being rich” came in second and third place respectively.<sup>55</sup> In a sense, the boys successfully achieved what many kids want to become: famous or infamous. A report by the “Rocky Mountain Media Watch,” prepared a year after the Columbine tragedy, showed that between May and October 1999 Columbine was mentioned about 9500 times in local media reports (4 television stations), and at least daily in the national media during the month subsequent to the massacre. It is now a more or less

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<sup>52</sup> B. J. Gibbons, *Spirituality and the Occult: from the Renaissance to the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 2001) 26. A fantastic example of panenanthropism can be found in the writings of Shirley MacLaine, *It’s All in the Playing* (New York: Bantam, 1988) see especially, 171-173.

<sup>53</sup> JCSO document #: JC – 001 – 026005. “I feel like God and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me. I already know that I am higher than most anyone in the fucking welt [German: world] in terms of universal Intelligence. And where we stand in the universe compared to the rest of the UNIVERSE.”

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, “Sources of the Self,” 43.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Johnson and Andy McSmith, “Children Say Being Famous is the Best Thing in the World,” *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/children-say-being-famous-is-best-thing-in-world-429000.html>

accepted fact that the excessive media coverage of the event catalyzed at least three thousand copycat actions, some which were successful, but most which were thwarted in time.<sup>56</sup>

To paraphrase Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, 125, where the madman announces the death of God, one must become a god oneself in order to appear worthy of the deed.<sup>57</sup> The fact that Nietzsche discusses God's death as a murder and not as his death by old age is one of Girard's most important insights into Nietzsche's philosophy and perhaps our contemporary brand of atheism. In a post-Judeo-Christian morality, murder that makes one famous becomes the foundation of a new type of divinity; yet, it is one that strongly resembles that of the pagan gods of old. It is perhaps then significant that both Harris and Klebold made many references to being or becoming godlike, and Harris even compared himself to the Greek god Zeus.<sup>58</sup>

Given the cult-like status of the Columbine shooters, their spectacularly violent deaths not only immortalized them, but they also became the foundation of a new type of nihilistic youth religion. They staged their massacre much like a film director would stage a movie to provide entertainment for his audience. Given the media coverage that they received, their gruesome crimes entertained not only other bored teenagers, who have come to believe that violence is 'cool,' but also the rest of the globe, making murder and suicide the fodder of international media ratings.

### **Conclusions**

In the case of school shootings, often the attainment of divinity is the goal. As shown, postmodern divinity is achieved through the orchestration of spectacular and 'entertaining' violence that often ends in murder and suicide, leading to a form of celebrity, namely, the infamy of the perpetrators. In our late modern western society, fame has become a substitute for immortality and people worship the famous as if they were gods. Modesty and humility are no longer perceived as virtues, but as liabilities, and celebrity has become so desirable that ordinary people are willing to degrade and humiliate themselves on so-called reality, talent and/or tabloid talk shows to achieve some degree of it. In order to achieve the highest good, namely fame, our civilization seems to encourage self-inflicted scapegoating and has created an ordinary class of self-humiliated 'gods,' who entertain us with their antics.

From their writings, videos and exploits, it is clear that the Columbine killers' understanding of the process of divinization closely follows Girard's scapegoating theory. The boys engaged in a process of auto-selection and mythologization *before* their crime,

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<sup>56</sup> "Columbine Anniversary Media Coverage," Rocky Mountain Media Alert, <http://www.bigmedia.org/texts8.html>

<sup>57</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 181. "Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

<sup>58</sup> Peter F. Langman, *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 50-58.

while in primitive societies, mythologization occurred *after* the crime. In the case of the media, given the fact that the perpetrators' true victims were themselves, in order to make sense out of the crime, the media launches a process of victim selection *a posteriori*, which later serves to mythologize not only the victims, but also the perpetrators. In many ways, given the postmodern confusion of divinity with celebrity, the media not only unconsciously selects, albeit after the fact, but also propagates the scapegoating system and its process of mythological divinization by rewarding the murderers' juvenile aspirations for fame and their audience, namely all of us, with entertainment. Although in death the perpetrators could never enjoy their newfound notoriety, knowing very well how the modern media works, they knew that their exploits would be globally disseminated and, hence, imitated.

Finally, this should teach us a lesson about the so-called 'humiliation theory' that is often used in the justification of the motives of school shooters, but also of suicide bombers and other suicidal terrorists. In many cases, 'humiliation' is not a reason, but a *tactic* in order to achieve what our contemporary – in the west or east – society seems to value most: fame or celebrity. As we have shown, in the minds of school shooters, and by extension suicide terrorists, self-humiliation and self-degradation are often auto-selective elements in the process of sacrificial self-divinization that can end in murder and suicide. The process is not only encouraged, but is also perpetuated by the negative attention that the media is compelled to give the shooters in order to sell papers or boost ratings. Since neither the media, nor the viewing public seem able to regulate themselves in this regard, it is imperative for overarching regulatory bodies or governments to find ways to limit media coverage of terrorist-type attacks without undermining an essential building block of western democracy: freedom of speech and expression. Whether this is possible is yet to be seen.

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