

Volf: God's Grace Surrounds Virginia Tech Shooter Cho's Photos, Video Message Made Scapegoating Difficult

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Photo Credit: Virginia Tech.

Virginia Tech student prays at makeshift memorial.

The killing of 32 students and faculty members at Virginia Tech served as a disquieting reminder that the grace of God is available even to those who commit horrific acts, theologians said in the wake of the worst shooting spree by a single gunman in U.S. history.

Further, they said, the shootings focused attention on a human tendency to scapegoat one person so that harmony and peace may be restored to the community. However, in this case a television network may have served as the scapegoat along with the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho.

As scandalous as it might seem, God's grace was immediately available to Cho, his parents and family, said Miroslav Volf, who is Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School. Cho was

the triggerman in the slaughter on the campus in Blacksburg, Va.

"Even that person who commits such a horrendous deed is already enveloped by God's grace," and so are his parents and immediate family, said Volf.

Grace needs to go primarily to those who have suffered, said Volf, and in this instance that is the family members of the students and faculty who were killed. But Christians must also try to reflect on what bearing grace may have on the shooter himself.

"Grace does not have any doubts," said Volf. It is a core conviction of the Christian faith.

Volf said the theological grounding for this understanding is found in *2 Corinthians 5:14*. There the Apostle Paul writes, "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are all

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convinced that one has
died for all; therefore all
have died."

As much as people tend
to look immediately for
ways to stop the shooting
while it is going on, said
Volf, Christians also "want
to show grace to this sort
(of person) to make sure
that he finds . . . redemp-
tion of this obvious, incredible
torment that was in his soul."

Volf is one of four theologians *Vital
Theology* interviewed after the shootings
at Virginia Tech. He is director of the Yale
Center for Faith and Culture. He is a
member of the Episcopal Church in the
U.S.A. and the Evangelical Church in
Croatia, where he was born and educated
through his undergraduate years in college.

The newsletter also interviewed theo-
logians S. Mark Heim of Andover Newton
School of Theology, Harvey G. Cox of
Harvard Divinity School (see related story,
page 6), and Paul J. Griffiths, of University of
Illinois at Chicago (see related story, page 5).

Grace for All

To illustrate how people resist the idea
that God's grace is available to all, Volf
tells a story about Carlos M. N. Eire, a Yale
historian who was airlifted from Cuba to
the U.S. as a child.

Eire's mother and a group of Cuban-born
women were discussing whether Fidel Castro
would go to heaven if he repented of his sins
on his deathbed. Unable to resolve the ques-
tion, they asked the professor, who serves as
their resident theologian.

When Eire told them that God's grace is
greater than anyone's failings, one woman
responded that if Castro gets to heaven, she
would not want to be there.

Said Volf: "When we feel that we have
been violated, we can't imagine being in
community with that person who violated us.

"The Christian faith is about creating com-
munion between enemies," he said. Grace is
not an end in itself. It is about bringing the
estranged person together with the person
who has been wronged for reconciliation.

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When societies try to regulate all types
of failings through legal means, as Volf main-
tains is occurring, the rules tend to push out
the offender rather than set up an environ-
ment in which that person can be engaged
and understood.

Although it is not easy for television to
portray the sharing of grace, a stellar exam-
ple occurred last October after a gunman
killed five girls and himself in a school in
Lancaster County, Pa.

Suddenly, the media were reporting on
a community that showed extraordinary
generosity to the family of the killer and to
the dead gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV.

"It was probably one of the most power-
ful witnesses that has occurred in public
life," said Volf. It was no accident that the
Amish were modeling forgiveness. Their
whole lives are about forgiving the enemy,
so when the moment for forgiveness
arrived they were ready.

The Amish are easily written off as people
with quaint customs, said Volf. They ride in
horse-drawn buggies, don't use telephones
and forgive killers. Because their attitude
about technology is easily dismissed, their
moral views may also be rejected.

But many people were profoundly moved
by the display of generosity, he said.

Praying for Cho

In Blacksburg, media reports captured
small groups of students praying, including
some prayers for Cho.

After a memorial of 32 stones was erected
on campus by a student group, Katelynn
Johnson, a senior sociology-psychology major
sneaked onto the site at 4 a.m. to add a 33rd
stone to honor Cho.

"My family did not raise me to do what
is popular," she wrote in a letter to the
campus newspaper in which she explained

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Miroslav Volf

her actions. “They raised me to do what is morally right. We did not lose only 32 students and faculty members that day; we lost 33 lives.”

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported that Cho’s name was included in many church services and in memorials on campus.

One of the challenges after a tragedy in which someone has wronged another person is to find ways to remember

the event well, said Volf.

“How do we remember it in ways that are not destructive to the community, that are not bitter and resentful?” he asked. It is difficult to find ways to remember that promote healing and reconciliation.

Rules-based methods will not succeed, said Volf. Instead, the answers must attend to the inner lives and character of people.

In Volf’s view, the concept of forgiveness will make little sense when many areas of our lives are dominated by a buy-and-sell culture.

“If you are in a buy-and-sell mode, then you operate in rough equivalents,” he said. “I give you this and I get that in return.”

In that context, forgiving can seem almost wrong and certainly unjust, said Volf. Such a commercial-transaction mentality shapes justice as retribution rather than restoring things to their proper order.

Scapegoating Dynamic

Responses to the shootings in Blacksburg had both similarities and contrasts with classic scapegoating, said Heim, who is Samuel Abbott Professor of Theology at Andover Newton in Boston.

In scapegoating, a community that has been wronged unites in condemnation or violence against one person. This serves to unify the community, he said.

The seemingly random violence that erupted at Virginia Tech set off people’s anxieties and disrupted their sense of security and peace.

“We want to reestablish a sense of harmony and peace, so we want to identify a cause, identify somebody who’s to blame,” said Heim.

At Virginia Tech, scapegoating occurred after a clear violation of established order, but is also occurs when the facts of the offense are less clear. Two examples cited by Heim are the McCarthy hearings to ferret out

Communists in the 1950s and the sexual-abuse hysteria at day care centers in the 1990s.

“When we look back we can see that this was such an affront to us—that our children should be threatened and sexually abused—that we had to find people who were responsible for this, even if it didn’t happen,” he said.

In classic scapegoating, the scapegoat victim is not allowed to provide a defense. That wasn’t the case at Virginia Tech, where the person who committed the crimes documented his feelings and that information was spread around the world via the news media.

As a result, it was hard for the community to unite against Cho because he removed himself from the scene and his testimony was heard and seen through the video clips and photographs that he sent to NBC. In addition, said Heim, the willingness of people to wonder aloud what motivated Cho and to show some sympa-

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thy for him indicate an awareness of the scapegoating dynamic and a desire not to fall prey to it.

“I attribute a lot of that awareness of this dynamic to the biblical tradition,” which has made people more sensitive to victims, said Heim. The public has heard much less from the shooting victims than from the perpetrator.

NBC’s decision to air the video and photos made the network a substitute scapegoat for some people, said Heim. When there is no immediate answer to preventing such a tragedy from occurring again, some blamed the media for making the situation worse.

Infallible Sign

According to Heim, the infallible sign of scapegoating is when the scapegoat victim is deemed to have influence far greater than what is merited.

“Then we know that they are beginning to serve another function for us than just somebody who is guilty of an offense,” he said.

That is precisely what the Amish in Pennsylvania avoided by expressing empathy and concern for the killer and his family, said Heim. From the beginning, they included

Roberts, the shooter, among those memorialized. By doing so, they did not let him become larger than life or a model for others to copy.

By striking a moral balance, the Amish community prevented Roberts from becoming the protagonist, or hero, of the story.

"I think that is a real concern about the Virginia Tech story," said Heim. "Somehow (Cho) has gotten what he sought, which is this sort of global prominence," even if it is in a form that people detest. By contrast, telling the story of the common humanity of the person who was the criminal mitigates against the event becoming a "ritual act beyond its own true character."

Scapegoating has many pernicious qualities, said Heim. Those who do it would never refer to it by that name. When we identify scapegoating in others, we say that we will be careful and never scapegoat someone in that position.

What happens, said Heim, is that we simply put a different person in that role.

As one who lives in a liberal community, Heim said the Duke University lacrosse story was particularly disturbing.

It is easy for a story to quickly transcend reality and for people to construe events into a morality play about profoundly larger issues, he said.

In this case, three white lacrosse players were charged with the rape of a black woman. Students, faculty and community members spoke out angrily against the players. Only after being in the public eye for a year were the players declared "innocent" of all charges by the state's attorney general.

Some were so eager to show their commitment to being on the right side of the issues of racism and privilege that the actual guilt or innocence of those people involved was submerged in the process. The moral of that story, said Heim, is to understand how hard it is to address the question of scapegoating to oneself.

Heim recently has reflected on the Scripture passage that describes the scene at the Last Supper in which Jesus tells the Disciples that one of them will betray him. One by one, they ask, "Is it me, Lord?"

In previous readings, said Heim, he has scoffed at the notion that each man didn't already know whether he was going to betray Jesus.

But there is profound insight in asking ourselves whether we could participate in such a thing, said Heim. "It is a sobering reality." ◀

Miroslav Volf is the author of *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* and *The End of Memory: Remembering in a Violent World*.

S. Mark Heim wrote about scapegoating and atonement theology in *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. Two related articles, "Christ's Death to End Sacrifice" and "Why Does Jesus' Death Matter," both published originally in *Christian Century*, are available at www.religion-online.org.



S. Mark Heim

After Much Mourning, Lamentations Tells of Hope

The classical expression in the Bible for dealing with overwhelming tragedy is the Old Testament book of Lamentations. The book of only five short chapters tells of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The text makes it clear that not only has a horrible destruction been visited upon the city, said Harvey G. Cox, of Harvard Divinity School, but the people are also distraught because their regular channels for imploring God for



Harvey Cox

mercy have been destroyed. Dead bodies lie in the streets, there is no food to eat and missing are the temples, altars and priests.

"They have a double dose of tragedy to deal with and much of it is given to this lamentation," said Cox, Hollis Professor of Divinity and an ordained American Baptist clergyman.

Modern-day mourners, such as those who grieved after the shootings at Virginia Tech, may suffer similarly.

"I think that happens with a lot of people," said Cox. "They feel that in the midst of a tragedy their regular

means of expressing grief in prayer or in some other way has also been undermined." There is a feeling that everything has been taken away.

But the final verses of Lamentations are an expression of hope and faith, he noted.

"It's not an easy resolution," said Cox. "It is a 'despite-all-this-we-will-continue' attitude. It's a very relevant text for this moment." ◀

Harvey Cox is currently writing on Lamentations. His most recent book is *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Decisions Today*.