The Mourning After Columbine:

Controversial Christian Commemoratives

Rob Wellington
Doug Sackman
History 400
May 11, 2011
Columbine was a watershed moment in Colorado and United States history. It is a moment that will continue to live in our memories, as people to this day remember exactly where they were when they first heard about this tragedy unfolding in Jefferson County…. The families of those who died that day remain in our thoughts and prayers.\textsuperscript{1}

— Colorado Governor Bill Ritter 2009

On Tuesday April 20, 1999 Columbine High School senior Cassie Bernall headed to the library to study for her 6\textsuperscript{th} hour Shakespeare test.\textsuperscript{2} Bernall had not even made it through her notes on Macbeth Act I when she and the rest of the people in the library heard gunshots in the hallway.\textsuperscript{3} Moments later, Bernall saw two students with shotguns and semiautomatic weapons bust open the library doors screaming expletives.\textsuperscript{4} Although Bernall did not know them, these two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were seniors like just like her. While walking past Bernall’s table, Klebold heard her quietly praying for her life. Not being particularly religious himself, Bernall’s prayer caught Klebold’s attention and he stopped, pointed his gun at her and asked, “Do you believe in God?”\textsuperscript{5} Looking into the barrel of the gun for a moment, Bernall paused and slowly answered, “Yes, I believe in God.”\textsuperscript{6} In an amused tone, Klebold asked Bernall, “Why?” and shot her point-blank before she could answer.\textsuperscript{7} She died instantly. Bernall had entered the Columbine library as an ordinary high school student. She left the school as a modern Christian martyr.

But there is a problem with this widely reported story. Though it has been enshrined in American popular memory as a key event in the Columbine Massacre, it is highly unlikely that

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
this conversation between Bernall and Klebold in the Columbine library ever actually happened.\textsuperscript{8} Bernall’s mythical martyrdom eventually inspired her mom, Misty Bernall, to write her daughter’s biography \textit{She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall}, which explicitly characterizes Bernall as a martyr. But as more information about the events in the library came to a surface, emotionally charged contestations broke out between Evangelical Christians and secular society over what exactly happened—in that library, at the school, and in America—on April 20.

Bernall’s biography was one of many Christian-inspired commemorative efforts to surface in southern Jefferson County after Columbine that incited debate within the bereaved community. A few days after the Columbine Massacre, a carpenter from Illinois, Greg Zanis, built fifteen crosses and erected them on a hill behind Columbine High School.\textsuperscript{9} The two crosses Zanis built for the shooters met with mixed responses from members of the Columbine community. These crosses especially upset Columbine victim Daniel Rohrbough’s father, Brian Rohrbough, who disagreed with commemorating murderers alongside victims.\textsuperscript{10} Debates over Christian-influenced memorialization also surfaced during the planning process for the Official Columbine Memorial. The Columbine Memorial Foundation, the non-profit organization in charge of the Memorial, wanted to incorporate written epitaphs from each of the victims’ families into the final design; they provided relatively vague guidelines regarding the content of the inscriptions.\textsuperscript{11} As a result, Rohrbough submitted a quote articulating a highly politicized religious message.\textsuperscript{12} The Foundation encouraged Rohrbough to soften the tone of his message,

\textsuperscript{9} Sylvia Grider, “Public Grief and the Politics of Memorial: Contesting the Memory of ‘The Shooters’ at Columbine High School,” \textit{Anthropology Today} 23, no. 3 (2007), June 2007, 2.
\textsuperscript{10} Grider, “Public Grief and the Politics of Memorial,” 6.
\textsuperscript{11} Laura Knowlton, “Memorial Design,” \textit{Columbine Memorial Foundation Inc.}, January 1, 2011, 1.
but to no avail. Although the Foundation permitted Rohrbough to retain the original content of his inscription, the etching remains a contentious aspect of the Columbine memorialization process.

Columbine was one of many traumatic events in contemporary American history to spark memorialization efforts. The Vietnam War became one of the first contemporary traumatic events to prompt a memorial. Soon after the War, veterans pushed for a memorial to honor those who had served in the War while avoiding commentary about the Vietnam War itself.\(^1\) Their vision eventually became the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. Decades after the Vietnam War, the Oklahoma City Bombing inspired memorials to pay homage to all the victims who lost their lives unexpectedly. As with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the resulting Oklahoma City National Memorial avoided making judgment statements about the Bombing so as to offer a neutral place of reflection.\(^2\) As predecessors to the Columbine Massacre, the memorialization processes for the Vietnam War and the Oklahoma City Bombing—and the way these events have been positioned in popular memory—serve as useful points of comparison to those of Columbine.

In American popular memory, the Columbine Massacre has come to be associated with a culture of violence and deviant youth. This is largely a result of the way in which the media framed the event. Soon after the shooting, many journalists and news anchors blamed the Columbine Massacre on lenient gun control laws, pervasive violence in popular entertainment, and bullying in schools.\(^3\) Despite its prominence, this toxic youth culture narrative is only one of many ways Columbine has been situated in collective memory. This paper seeks to bring to light the lesser-known Christian-influenced memorialization efforts to the tragic events of April 20,

\(^{2}\) Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, 137.
1999. These faith-based commemorative efforts for Columbine reflect a tendency in public history to use religion to explain the past in a more socially relevant way than academic historians often can in their attempts to provide objective analysis.

In the aftermath of the Columbine Massacre, residents of southern Jefferson County, and the greater Columbine community, employed Christianity in a variety of ways to memorialize that traumatic event. Like memorials for other events, those created for the Columbine Massacre aimed to help the bereaved Columbine Community heal from the sheer violence and devastation Columbine wrought on southern Jefferson County and the Nation. **Despite Christianity’s large influence on southern Jefferson County, the use of Christian rhetoric and symbolism to memorialize the Columbine Massacre initially created controversies and divisions—rather than closure and unity as would be expected of a memorial—as the bereaved Columbine community contested the proper role of faith for commemorating the event. With the passage of time, however, these memorialization efforts became less divisive, since members of the Columbine community generally came to accept religion as one of many ways to commemorate this tragic event.**

**A Decade of Terrorism**

Harris and Klebold had planned to carry out a large-scale terrorist attack in which destroying Columbine High School was intended to play just a small part of their overall scheme. In a journal entry in February before the shootings, Harris predicted that April 20th would be “like the L.A. riots, the Oklahoma bombing, WWII, Vietnam, Duke [Nukem] and Doom all mixed together.”

---

and then “hijack a heck of a lot of bombs and crash a plane into NYC with us inside firing away as we go down.”

Because the bombs the shooters planted in Columbine High School never went off, Harris and Klebold had to scale down their apocalyptic plans. The shooters’ revised agenda became the school shooting now known as the Columbine Massacre. Although Harris and Klebold did not wreak havoc on the scale they initially planned, they nevertheless executed domestic terrorism. Accordingly, Columbine memorialization processes resemble those of other acts of terrorism committed against America.

Columbine was not the only incident of domestic terrorism in the late 20th century to prompt commemorative efforts. Four years and one day before the Columbine Massacre, April 19, 1995, two paramilitary fanatics, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nicholas, drove bombs into the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 innocent victims and injuring another 680 people. Being the most destructive act of terrorism on American soil before the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Oklahoma City Bombing sparked numerous memorialization efforts as people grappled with the immense trauma of the Bombing.

Indiana University public historian Edward Linenthal studied how Americans memorialized the Oklahoma City Bombing his book The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory. After examining the memorialization process, Linenthal concluded, “The bombing moved from ‘event’ to ‘story’ as family members of those killed and survivors lived out several stories.”

One of the stories was the redemptive narrative, which served as a means “to give members of particular religious communities theological contexts through which they could locate the bombing religiously…understanding evil’s place in the world and God’s role in

---

17 Harris, “Diary Entry,” 1.
18 Larkin, Comprehending Columbine, 45.
20 Linenthal, The Unfinished Bombing, 4.
human life.”\textsuperscript{21} In the redemptive narrative, all the people who died in the Bombing had been chosen by God to go onto a better existence in the afterlife; their death was preordained and not necessarily tragic. At the same time, the perpetrators had committed pure evil and would ultimately go to Hell for their cruel actions. The redemptive narrative, then, offered a comforting and meaningful explanation of the Oklahoma City Bombing to countless people who otherwise might not have been able to work through such trauma. Through the lens of the redemptive narrative, the Oklahoma City Bombing transformed from an unexplainable tragic happening to a religiously triumphant event.

**Christian Suburbia**

Like the Oklahoma City Bombings, the Columbine Massacre was an unanticipated act of domestic terrorism. Not surprisingly, many Americans impacted by Columbine tried to understand the shooting through a religious framework akin to the redemptive narrative employed by the Oklahoma City Bombing’s bereaved community. Admittedly, numerous explanations surfaced about the causes and consequences of the Columbine Massacre. However, the demographics of southern Jefferson County created an environment in which religiously-inspired commemoratives for Columbine became ubiquitous. Columbine High School is not situated in a town but rather in an unincorporated section of southern Jefferson County comprised of miles of suburbs west of Denver. As an unincorporated territory twenty miles south of the county seat, southern Jefferson County has no town hall, post office, or other government

\textsuperscript{21} Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing*, 42. Linenthal described two other narratives in addition to the redemptive narrative. First was a progressive narrative that examined the possibilities of healing and civic renewal in Oklahoma City. It also looked at a general goodness that trauma brings out in Americans. Second, was a toxic narrative that emphasized the impact of the “sheer happening” of mass murder on residents of Oklahoma City and Americans in general; it looked at the corrosive effects of seemingly endless grief on those who lived through the Bombing.
funded gathering place for the community.\textsuperscript{22} Therefore, the region has had to find community through other means.

In lieu of secular gathering places, churches have largely provided community for residents of southern Jefferson County. According to the 2000 Census, southern Jefferson County had a population of about 60,000 residents. Along the same lines, sociologist Ralph Larkin in his book \textit{Comprehending Columbine} estimates that the area immediately surrounding Columbine High School had approximately seventy Christian churches.\textsuperscript{23} Assuming an average family size of four persons per household, there was one church for every 250 families in southern Jefferson County as of 2000. That represents quite a significant concentration of religious institutions for such a relatively small area. In addition to the high concentration of Christian churches in southern Jefferson County, Colorado’s Front Range Urban Corridor—the metropolitan zone east of the Rocky Mountains spanning from Ft. Collins in the north to Colorado Springs in the south—contains several conservative Christian organizations. For instance, Colorado Springs is home to the Evangelical educational complex known as Focus on the Family, while Denver is headquarters for the hyper-masculine Christian organization Promise Keepers as well the influential religious right lobbying group Christian Coalition.\textsuperscript{24} Clearly, Christianity had a noticeable presence in the vicinity of Columbine High School. As a force that connected many in southern Jefferson County, Christianity necessarily shaped the Columbine community’s reactions to the Columbine Massacre.

\textsuperscript{22} Larkin, \textit{Comprehending Columbine}, 12.
\textsuperscript{24} Larkin, \textit{Comprehending Columbine}, 40.
She Said What?

In the aftermath of the Columbine Massacre, Evangelical Christians in southern Jefferson County struggled to comprehend how one of the most violent school crimes in American history could have occurred in their neighborhood. In an effort to preserve the positive image of their community, Christians framed the Columbine Massacre as a struggle between the moral Christian majority and a minority of sinful dissidents in the area. One way Evangelicals promoted this Manichean message was through publishing hagiographic biographies about victims of the Columbine Massacre who strictly adhered to their faith until the end. The biography *She Said Yes*, the most prominent of these efforts, framed Columbine victim Cassie Bernall as a Christian martyr based on unsubstantiated claims about the circumstances surrounding her death. As a result of the dubiousness of the martyrdom account, *She Said Yes* generated a great deal of contention between Evangelical Christians and secular society.

The book derived its title from early reports about a conversation between Bernall and Klebold immediately before Klebold shot her in the Columbine High School library. Within hours of the shooting, Bernall’s pastor Dave McPherson visited her family’s house with unexpected news exclaiming, “Oh my God, they [the shooters] asked Cassie if she believed in God, and when she said yes, they shot her.” This news shocked Bernall’s parents, Misty and Brad, who could hardly believe their daughter had died defending her faith. Before the Bernalls could accept such a fantastic story, they needed confirmation about the events in the library from other survivors.

The Bernalls found it in the weeks following the Columbine Massacre. A few days after McPherson’s visit, survivor Joshua Lapp, who had also had been in the Columbine library, told

---

25 Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine*, 41.
the Bernalls a similar version of their daughter’s final moments. According to Lapp, “They [the shooters] walked up to her [Bernall] and said, ‘Do you believe in God?’ There was a pause and she said, ‘Yes.’”27 Like McPherson’s account, Lapp recalled that after Bernall answered in the affirmative, Klebold asked her why she believed in God and shot her before she had a chance to say anything else.28 Soon after hearing Lapp’s recollection, another survivor from the library, Craig Scott, told the Bernalls that he had heard Bernall answer “Yes” before dying.29 Having heard three different people support the story, Bernall’s parents accepted that their daughter had died a martyr.

Based on the belief that Bernall died defending her faith, Misty Bernall cast her daughter as the “Martyr of Littleton” in She Said Yes.30 At the start of chapter seven, Misty Bernall boldly claimed, “[In] Greek martyrria means ‘witness’ and refers to someone who refuses, in the face of terror and torture, to deny his or her faith. By that definition it’s not at all inaccurate to call Cassie a martyr.”31 In Misty Bernall’s eyes, her daughter had become a modern example of a Christian martyr stoically accepting execution to defend her faith. The biography suggested that Christianity enabled Bernall to maintain her composure at gunpoint. Later in the same chapter, Misty Bernall asserted, “The real issue raised by Cassie’s death is not what she said to her killers, but what it was that enabled her to face them as she did—Christianity.”32 In Misty Bernall’s opinion, her daughter had been predetermined to die defending her faith during the Columbine Massacre in the brave calm way that she did. She Said Yes used Christian rhetoric to

28 Cullen, Columbine, 231.
29 Wendy M. Zoba, Day of Reckoning: Columbine and the Search for America’s Soul (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 89.
31 Bernall, She Said, 115.
32 Bernall, She Said Yes, 119.
memorialize the Columbine Massacre as a divine moment in American history in which Bernall defended her faith in front of nonbelievers as she faced death.

Despite Misty Bernall’s certainty that her daughter died a martyr in *She Said Yes*, conflicting reports began surfacing about what actually happened in the library. The triumphantly religious Columbine memorial the Evangelical community had crafted digressed into a contentious debate over the true events in the Columbine High School library. Certainly, Lapp and Scott had been in the library with Bernall during the Columbine Massacre. However, each of them had hidden under separate tables in different parts of the room. In contrast to Lapp and Scott, Columbine survivor Emily Wyant hid under the same table as Bernall. Interestingly, Wyant’s version of events differed from the aforementioned accounts.

After the Columbine Massacre, Wyant began hearing the rumors about Bernall’s martyrdom. As a direct witness to Bernall’s death, Wyant knew Bernall had not died a martyr and wanted to alert people to the truth about what had happened in the library. Despite her certainty that no such conversation had ever taken place between Bernall and the shooters, Wyant feared reprisal from Bernall’s parents and others invested in the martyr narrative for disputing the story. Accordingly, for several weeks Wyant did not say anything. Eventually, she anonymously testified against the martyr narrative to journalist Dan Luzadder of the local Denver newspaper called the *Rocky Mountain News*. Unfortunately, the newspaper delayed releasing an article refuting the martyrdom narrative, hoping to time this with the release of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department investigation of the Columbine Massacre to get as much mileage out of the story as possible. As a result of the *Rocky Mountain News*’ decision to wait

---

33 Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine*, 47.
34 Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine*, 47.
35 Cullen, *Columbine*, 230.
36 Cullen, *Columbine*, 230.
on releasing this story, increasing numbers of people began to accept Bernall’s martyrdom as the de facto narrative of events in Columbine’s library on April 20.37

It was not until five months after the Columbine Massacre in September 1999 that Americans heard Wyant’s competing narrative about Bernall. During the time the Rocky Mountain News stalled on publishing their story, journalist Dave Cullen, who worked for Salon.Com, managed to obtain the unreleased version of Wyant’s testimony and included it in an article he had already planned to write about the Columbine Massacre. After learning about this competing version of events, Cullen arranged for an interview with Wyant in July to provide a more complete version of the story. Cullen finally released his interview and commentary about Wyant’s story on September 23, 1999 in a provocatively titled article “Inside the Columbine High Investigation: Everything You Know About the Littleton Killings is Wrong. But the Truth May be Scarier than the Myths.”38

According to Wyant, Bernall died in the Columbine Massacre before she ever had a chance to speak to either shooter. During the interview with Cullen, Wyant recalled talking to Bernall just as the shooters entered the library and Bernall whispered to her, “Dear God, why is this happening? I just want to go home.”39 Wyant remembered answering, “We all want to get out of here.”40 She would never hear from or speak to Bernall again after that conversation.41 According to Wyant, after they finished talking, Klebold come over to their table, pointed his

---

37 Larkin, Comprehending Columbine, 48.
38 Dave Cullen, “Inside the Columbine High Investigation: Everything You Know about the Littleton Killings is Wrong. But the Truth May be Scarier than the Myths,” Salon.Com, September 23, 1999, 1. Cullen subsequently drew heavily from for this article in writing his book investigating the Columbine Massacre, Columbine, ten years later.
41 Wyant, “Interview,” 227.
Wellington

shotgun at Bernall, yelled “Peekaboo,” and pulled the trigger without any further dialogue. Wyant recalled seeing Bernall silently crumple to the floor, no more a martyr than any of the other unsuspecting Columbine victims. In her interview with Cullen, Wyant acknowledged that Bernall had mentioned God before dying during the course of their brief conversation before Klebold came over to the table. However, Wyant refuted the widely held claim that Bernall had died directly defending her faith to Klebold.

Once Cullen released Wyant’s testimony, an increasing body of evidence began to surface that conflicted with the well-established “Martyr of Littleton” story. Bree Pasquale, another Columbine survivor from the library who had hidden under a table adjacent to Bernall’s, had overheard a conversation between one of the shooters and a girl about her faith. However, Pasquale did not think that the conversation was between Bernall and the shooters. While testifying for a police report, Pasquale asserted that Bernall “never got a chance to speak” after Klebold yelled “Peekaboo” and shot her. Instead, Klebold had asked Valeen Schnurr, who was shot but not killed in the library, whether she believed in God. Like the Bernall martyrdom story, Klebold shot Schnurr for answering in the affirmative. This narrative shift caught the attention of the media.

The rival newspaper for the Rocky Mountain News, the Denver Post heard about Pasquale’s version of events in the Columbine library, and asked to print a story about it for its uniqueness. Denver Post journalist Mark Obmascik printed a dramatic retelling of his interview with Pasquale on June 13th writing, “Bleeding from nine bullets and shrapnel wounds, Schnurr

---

42 Cullen, Columbine, 227.
43 Cullen, Columbine, 225.
45 Wendy M. Zoba, Day of Reckoning: Columbine and the Search for America’s Soul (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 94.
46 Cullen, Columbine, 228.
mumbled, ‘oh, my God.’ Klebold stopped her. ‘Do you believe in God?’ He demanded. ‘Yes, my mom and dad brought me up that way,’ Schnurr replied. She fainted and fell to the floor.”

Aside from the fact that Schnurr had been asked about her faith instead of Bernall, Pasquale’s account matched up with other survivors’ stories. Due to the similarities between this version of events versus the martyrdom story, Pasquale’s testimony raised serious doubts amongst many about Bernall’s final moments. Initially, southern Jefferson County’s Evangelical Christians had been able to explain away the Columbine Massacre happening in their community by casting it as an example of residents’ strong commitment to their faith. However, with increasing evidence to the contrary, Bernall’s martyrdom myth was losing credence and dividing the bereaved Columbine community over the specific details of April 20th. Moreover, the evidence that was available in support of Bernall’s martyrdom was not as solid as that discrediting it.

While Americans had to accept Bernall’s martyrdom story on faith, Schnurr survived the Columbine Massacre and could therefore provide testimony for her conversation in the library. According to Cullen’s *Columbine*, “Val started blurtling out what had happened almost immediately” after she regained consciousness at the hospital. Thus, Schnurr personally remembered having a conversation about her faith with Klebold before being shot. Because Bernall’s martyrdom story had been long in circulation by the time people began to hear Schnurr’s account, it did not enjoy the same enthusiastic reception from Evangelical Christians. Instead, many Evangelicals accused Schnurr of being a copycat. In her interview with Cullen, Schnurr recalled constantly being asked, “‘Are you sure that’s how it happened?’” each time she

---


48 Cullen, *Columbine*, 225.
would share her story with someone.\textsuperscript{49} Because she had risked injury to defend her faith, Schnurr grew tired of people doubting her story. Speaking in the second person during her interview with Cullen, Schnurr lamented, “You know in your heart where you were and what you said, and then people doubt you.”\textsuperscript{50} Despite the skepticism amongst southern Jefferson County’s Christian community towards Schnurr’s story, additional evidence surfaced substantiating her claim while further discrediting that articulated in \textit{She Said Yes}.

On May 25, 1999 the Jefferson County Sherriff’s Department opened Columbine High School to families who were directly impacted by the Columbine Massacre.\textsuperscript{51} In addition to the families, the Sheriff’s Department invited witnesses who had testified for or against Bernall’s martyrdom to retell their story in the space in which it actually happened.\textsuperscript{52} As one of the main proponents of Bernall’s martyr narrative, Scott agreed to the Sheriff’s request. Scott’s recounting further debunked \textit{She Said Yes}. Police reports note that while he was describing Bernall’s death, Scott had been asked to point out where Bernall had hidden and he gestured towards Schnurr’s desk instead.\textsuperscript{53} When the investigating officer pointed out this mistake, Scott insisted, “‘She [Bernall] was somewhere over there, I know that for a fact.’”\textsuperscript{54} Ironically, in trying to prove Bernall’s martyrdom narrative, Scott ended up validating Schnurr’s version of events by pointing to her desk. Scott’s mistake further discredited the Bernall martyrdom because it demonstrated that he did not remember the exact details about what happened in the library, calling his entire testimony into question. Through following up with testimonies in the Columbine library, the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department further discredited the Bernall martyrdom narrative. The

\textsuperscript{50} Schnurr, “Interview about Events in the Library,” 225.
\textsuperscript{51} Larkin, \textit{Comprehending Columbine}, 47.
\textsuperscript{52} Cullen, \textit{Columbine}, 231.
\textsuperscript{53} Cullen, \textit{Columbine}, 231.
\textsuperscript{54} Jefferson County Sherriff’s Office, \textit{Time line on Columbine Shootings}, June 1, 1999, 8.
ballistics report for the Columbine Massacre also complicated the martyrdom narrative by suggesting that Harris rather than Klebold had shot Bernall. This report ran counter to all of the eyewitness accounts of Bernall’s final moments, and thus raised additional doubts about whether she had said yes or not.\(^{55}\)

Much of the media tended to gravitate towards the newly released evidence denying Bernall’s martyrdom rather than testimony from witnesses supporting that version of events. Therefore, many journalists classified “the Martyr of Littleton” narrative as fictitious. In October 1999, Mary Schmich of the *Chicago Tribune* concluded, “‘The unlikely martyrdom of Cassie Bernall,’ as ‘She Said Yes’ is subtitled, turns out to be not only unlikely but untrue.”\(^{56}\) Schmich presented the view that Bernall had not died a martyr as a near fact even though neither side’s story quite added up. Expressing similar sentiments, Jon Carroll of the *San Francisco Chronicle* that same month wrote, “We cannot understand a story if we are operating from incorrect data…What Cassie Bernall said has become a symbol. It’s a symbol based on a lie.”\(^{57}\) Like Schmich, Carroll did not acknowledge the absence of conclusive evidence for both viewpoints on Bernall. These statements reflect the media’s tendency to reject Bernall’s martyrdom narrative without even considering the possibility of future evidence that might support one narrative or the other as soon as testimonies challenging the martyrdom narrative came out. The media was not alone in taking a one sided approach to representing Bernall’s final moments.

---

\(^{55}\) U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Columbine High School*, June 1, 2003, Washington, DC, 5201. While most eyewitnesses had recalled Klebold asking Bernall about her faith and subsequently killing her, the Columbine Massacre ballistics report attributed Eric Harris to killing Bernall. The report concluded, “Harris walked over to Table 19, where he bent down and saw two frightened girls. He slapped the table top [sic] twice, said, ‘Peek-a-boo,’ and fired, killing Cassie Bernall.” The report justified this conclusion based on the fact that Harris had a broken nose after the shooting but it was not broken when he entered the School. Investigators speculate that Harris broke his nose when he bent down to shoot Bernall and the kick from the gun forced it back into his face. Although the ballistics report further complicates the martyrdom narrative by introducing a different perpetrator, it did not influence the content of *She Said Yes*.


The Christian community proved equally unwilling to acknowledge contending viewpoints about Bernall’s martyrdom. When asked whether she still believed her daughter had said yes or not in an interview with journalist Wendy Zoba for her book about Columbine called *Day of Reckoning: Columbine and the Search for America’s Soul*, Misty Bernall asserted, “Cassie said yes to God every day of her life…‘Yes, I’ll follow Christ.’” Misty Bernall could not conceive of people questioning her daughter’s martyrdom given that Cassie Bernall devoted herself to Christianity on a daily basis. The Christian clergy in southern Jefferson County voiced equally strong convictions that Bernall had died a martyr. Talking about Bernall in January 2000 Bruce Porter, a minister in Littleton, Colorado, declared, “The fact that so many who knew her instantly accepted the initial reports that she said ‘yes’ is a clear indication that, without any doubt whatsoever, she…said it!” Like the journalists who denied Bernall’s martyrdom, Porter steadfastly refused to acknowledge that evidence existed for a competing viewpoint about the martyrdom narrative.

Despite Misty Bernall’s insistence that her daughter had said yes, she and her publishing company Plough Publishers recognized that Bernall’s biography could prove quite controversial. Accordingly, *She Said Yes* acknowledged the possibility of competing narratives in the final draft that came out in September 1999. Agreeing that the available evidence did not fully support the martyrdom narrative, Plough Publishers opted to place a disclaimer at the beginning of *She Said Yes* informing readers of “varying recollections” about Bernall’s last moments. The disclaimer further stated, “The precise chronology of the murderous rampage that took place at Columbine

---

High School…including the exact details of Cassie’s death may never be known.”61 This statement effectively reflects the reality of the Bernall martyrdom narrative. To this day, no conclusive evidence has surfaced confirming whether Bernall ever had a conversation with either Harris or Klebold about her faith before dying or not. Certainly, Bernall’s death has proved to be a divisive aspect of the commemoration process for Columbine.

The unresolved controversy over Bernall’s martyrdom aligns with intellectual historian Kerwin Klein’s recent scholarship on the role of memory in public, rather than professional, history. In his article “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse” for Reflections, Klein suggested that Americans have increasingly turned to public history because it offers them a more intimate and socially relevant interpretation of the past. Specifically, Klein argued, “One of the reasons that memory promises aural returns is that its traditional association with religious contexts and meaning is so much older than the comparatively recent efforts of professional historians…to separate history as a secular practice from a background of cultural religiosity.”62 In their efforts to offer an objective interpretation of the past, professional historians avoid religious interpretations. Yet, many non-historians use their faith to understand the world around them and can no more understand the past than the present in a secular way.

Bernall’s martyrdom appealed to a large sector of the Columbine community because it framed Columbine in religious terms and was based primarily on people’s memories about what had happened. Public history allows for these kinds of narratives in a way that academic history does not. In fact, according to Klein, “Memory and its associated keywords continue to invoke a range of theological concepts…it is a commonplace that memorial practice anchors religious

61 Bernall, She Said Yes, foreword n.p.
rituals in a wide variety of beliefs.” Memory, which is not necessarily secular, often influences memorials. As a textual memorial to Columbine largely based on people’s memory, *She Said Yes* reflects the tendency for public histories to be anchored in a religious framework. While the police reports disputing Bernall’s martyrdom may have provided a more objective version of what happened in the library, they did not explain the event in a theological manner. Consequently, the secular reports about Bernall’s final moments proved less comforting than the martyrdom myth to southern Jefferson County’s highly religious community. Therefore, it was quite important for Christians in the Columbine community to keep Bernall’s martyrdom story alive even in the face of evidence to the contrary.

To this day Bernall’s story of martyrdom has been enshrined in American popular memory as a touching moment in the otherwise gruesome and tragic Columbine Massacre. However, within both the bereaved Columbine community and academic circles, the myth of Bernall has not been as readily accepted due to the lack of conclusive evidence one way or another. Therefore, Bernall’s story remains a controversial and unsubstantiated narrative complicating the formation of a collective memory about what actually happened in the library on April 20, 1999. Although *She Said Yes* was one of a few biographies written about a Columbine victim, many other religiously-inspired memorialization efforts precipitated divisions within the Columbine community in the aftermath of the shootings.

**Cross Talk**

One of the more well-known and controversial memorials to the Columbine Massacre was a collection of crosses erected to commemorate the victims by Illinois carpenter Greg Zanis.

The idea for these crosses came from Columbine student Brian Anderson who fled the school as

---

63 Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” 130 emphasis in original.
soon as the shootings began. Immediately after Columbine, Anderson felt guilty that not everyone had been as lucky as him and he wanted to do something to show his deep regret for those whose lives and loved ones had been lost. As a devout Christian, Anderson wanted to incorporate his faith into the memorial in some way. In researching memorialization efforts for other tragedies that incorporated Christian symbolism, Anderson discovered Zanis’ non-profit company Crosses for Losses, which built crosses for victims of violent tragedies. To Anderson, Crosses for Losses seemed like an ideal way to memorialize the victims of the Columbine Massacre and he contacted Zanis asking him to build crosses. Zanis accepted the request but took a different direction than Anderson had initially expected.

As planned in their phone conversation, Zanis arrived at Columbine High School with his six-foot-tall crosses in the back of his truck on April 27, 1999. Once Zanis began unloading them, however, it appeared to Anderson that a mistake had been made in the order. Only thirteen people had been killed during the Columbine Massacre but Zanis had built fifteen crosses. Zanis made it clear that he had intentionally constructed crosses for the shooters since they had also lost their lives. Zanis hauled all fifteen crosses to the top of a prominent hill behind Columbine High School in Clement Park—informally referred to as Rebel Hill because Columbine’s mascot are the Rebels. After setting up all the crosses, Zanis included the name and a picture of each the deceased on their respective cross; he also left markers for people to write comments on the crosses with. The fifteen crosses immediately became controversial, dividing the Columbine community over the appropriateness of commemorating the shooters along with the other victims.

64 Larkin, Comprehending Columbine, 50.
65 Larkin, Comprehending Columbine, 50.
66 Zoba, Day of Reckoning, 44.
67 Larkin, Comprehending Columbine, 51.
68 Grider, “Public Grief and the Politics of Memorial, 6.
Zanis himself had chosen to include the shooters in his memorial design to symbolize Christian forgiveness. When asked why he built the crosses for Harris and Klebold during an interview with Zoba for *Day of Reckoning*, Zanis explained, “I just want people to know one person loves them...It’s very simple: Jesus’ arms are open...and he loves all.”69 In Zanis’ opinion, constructing crosses for the shooters most closely reflected Christ’s teachings. Therefore, the additional two crosses reflected an appropriate Christian-inspired commemorative response to the Columbine Massacre from Zanis’ perspective.

Some within the Columbine community agreed with Zanis advocating forgiveness for the victims. For instance, on Klebold’s cross one visitor referenced scripture advocating clemency: “‘Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.’”70 In using the *Bible* to justify pardoning Klebold, this visitor reaffirmed the stance that forgiveness aligns with Christian theology. Not all visitors directly referenced the *Bible* to justify forgiveness. Nevertheless, they voiced a conciliatory attitude towards the shooters. On Harris’ cross one person declared, “Begin to forgive” while another visitor asserted, “I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you.”71 These visitors were willing to remit Harris as a fellow human being who makes mistakes from time to time even when doing so cost people’s lives. In both of these cases, the crosses, which were symbols of Christian redemption, functioned as a forum for visitors to advocate reconciliation between Harris and Klebold and the Columbine community.

Though not voicing clemency towards Harris and Klebold, some visitors took ownership for their and society’s partial responsibility for the Columbine Massacre. For example, a

---

comment on the top of Harris’ cross read, “No one is to blame.”72 The author of this comment recognized that so many factors coalesced to cause the Columbine Massacre that no one person should be held accountable for what happened. In some cases, rather than blaming the shooters, the crosses created a space for residents of southern Jefferson County to admit to their role in precipitating Columbine. On Harris’ cross, one visitor apologized to him for the community saying, “Sorry we failed you.”73 Similarly, on Klebold’s cross someone expressed his/her culpability saying, “I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you on April 17th. Would it have made a difference if I would have?”74 Both people’s comments recognized how alienated Harris and Kelbold felt from their school and community and regretted that the shooters felt so disliked. Along the same lines, on Klebold’s cross, someone apologized for his/her ignorance: “I’m sorry I didn’t realize your pain.”75 This visitor felt ashamed that she/he had not paid more attention to a fellow community member. In each of these cases, visitors resisted placing all the blame on Harris and Klebold and acknowledged the culpability of the greater community.

In contrast to the community’s conciliatory messages to Harris and Klebold, a number of comments on their crosses belied more hostile language. Such diverse responses reflect the divisive nature of Christian-inspired memorials within the Columbine community. One of the first documented comments written on both of the shooters’ crosses read, “HATE BREEDS HATE.”76 The author of this statement made it clear that s/he did not forgive Harris and Klebold for their murderous actions and emphasized this point by writing the whole message in capital letters. This statement reflected fear-based Christian rhetoric concentrating on eternal Damnation

74 “Comments on Klebold’s Cross,” quoted in Wendy M. Zoba, Day of Reckoning: Columbine and the Search for America’s Soul (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 47.
75 “Comments on Klebold’s Cross,” quoted in Zoba, Day of Reckoning, 47.
rather than love and forgiveness that other visitors had proclaimed. Similarly vituperative messages appeared on the shooters’ crosses. Directly under the previous comment, someone asserted, “Evil Bastard!” on both crosses. In using “evil,” the author of this comment framed the Columbine Massacre as a Manichean struggle between the thirteen morally sound victims against the cold-blooded faithless shooters. This visitor seemed to regard the shooters as too cruel to be included in a memorial to the victims, let alone be forgiven. Certain visitors, then, used the shooters’ crosses to broadcast their anger towards Harris and Klebold for making such a negative impact on the Columbine community.

In most cases, neither visitors voicing forgiveness nor those expressing anger chose to reveal their identities on the crosses. However, Brian Rohrbough, the father of Columbine victim Daniel Rohrbough, claimed ownership for his condemning messages. Immediately after hearing that Zanis had constructed crosses for the shooters, Rohrbough rushed to Rebel Hill and scrawled, “Murderers Burn in HELL” on both Harris and Klebold’s crosses and signed his name underneath. From Rohrbough’s point of view, the shooters had killed his only son without provocation and the only just reaction to this behavior was an eternal afterlife if Hell. Rohrbough had initially planned on leaving the shooters’ crosses standing on Rebel Hill so that all visitors could read his condemning statement towards Harris and Klebold given that few others seemed to be actively condemning them.

However, once Rohrbough noticed that visitors had begun to express sympathetic and conciliatory comments on the shooters’ crosses, he insisted on removing them. In Rohrbough’s opinion, building crosses for Harris and Klebold and then writing kind statements about them

---

78 “Comments on Harris and the Search for America’s Soul,” quoted in Cullen, *Columbine*, 194.
79 Cullen, *Columbine*, 194.
constituted sacrilege. During an interview with Cullen about his opinions on the shooters’ crosses, Rohrbough asserted, “You don’t cheapen what Christ did for us by honoring murderers with crosses. There’s nowhere in the Bible that says to forgive an unrepentant murderer…These fools have come out saying ‘Forgive everyone.’ You don’t repent, you don’t forgive them—that’s what the Bible says.” Rohrbough believed Harris and Klebold had committed too great a sin without ever having shown penitence to deserve forgiveness from him or anyone else who considered themselves Christian. Hoping to make a nationwide statement about how true Christians ought to deal with murderers, Rohrbough decided to publically dismantle the shooters’ crosses while CNN broadcast him doing so live to the world. Before removing the crosses from Rebel Hill, Rohrbough justified his actions to CNN claiming, “We don’t build a monument to Adolf Hitler and put it in the Holocaust Museum—and it’s not going to happen here [Clement Park].” Rohrbough’s comparison of the shooters to Hitler reaffirmed his belief that Harris and Klebold had committed such a cruel atrocity that they should never be forgiven.

Not surprisingly, in removing the shooters’ crosses from Rebel Hill Rohrbough incited divisions amongst the Columbine community. Rohrbough believed he had done the right thing. In an interview with the Boston Globe after he cut down the crosses, Rohrbough argued, “I don’t think any thinking person in this country is going to disagree with me….We never ever honor a murderer in the same place as the memorial for his victims.” Rohrbough could not understand how anyone would view Harris or Klebold as victims in the Columbine Massacre given that they murdered the thirteen victims prior to killing themselves. Based on that thought process,

---

80 Cullen, Columbine, 194.
81 Zoba, Day of Reckoning, 49.
Rohrbough believed removing the victims’ crosses had transformed Zanis’ memorial into the faith-based commemoration to Columbine victims that it ought to have been from the start.

Despite Rohrbough’s defense of removing the shooters’ crosses to improve the memorial, many in the Columbine community disagreed with him. In an interview with the Rocky Mountain News after the shooters’ crosses were removed, an anonymous woman argued, “People need to learn to forgive” rather than “dwell on the horrors of that day [the Columbine Massacre].” In the interviewee’s eyes, Rohrbough had only delayed the healing process for the Columbine community by removing the victims’ crosses. Therefore, his actions had done more harm than good. Zanis agreed with the woman’s view. When asked to comment on Rohrbough’s choice to remove the victims’ crosses during an interview with Zoba for Day of Reckoning, Zanis lamented, “This is not what I put them up for. We [nosism] put them up for closure and other reasons, not for people to find a target. They were defiling my crosses.” In Zanis’ eyes, destroying the two shooters’ crosses defeated the original purpose of his memorial as a space to promote forgiveness. Rohrbough had transformed the cross memorial from a site of healing to a place of controversy and contention.

Since he did not like what had happened with his memorial, Zanis returned to Colorado on May 1, 1999 to address the situation. “Angry because it got to be so controversial,” Zanis removed the remaining thirteen crosses from Rebel Hill and took them back to Illinois. Zanis assumed removing all the crosses would resolve the controversy his memorial had inadvertently sparked within the Columbine community. That did not happen. Many in the Columbine community found comfort in the iconic image of the crosses on top of Rebel Hill honoring the

---

86 Zanis, “Interview about Reaction to Rohrbough’s Actions,” 6.
Columbine Massacre. Therefore, a number of southern Jefferson County residents wanted to have them back. In his interview with Zoba, Zanis recalled that as soon as he had removed the crosses he received “numerous calls from people in Colorado saying ‘Greg [Zanis], please bring those crosses down’ or ‘Greg, you can’t do that. We want those crosses back.’”87 Despite Rohrbough dividing the Columbine community over the appropriateness of memorializing Harris and Klebold, southern Jefferson County regarded Zanis’ remaining thirteen crosses as a valuable commemorative response.

Though Zanis’ decision to remove the entire set of crosses from Rebel Hill disappointed many in the Columbine community, it particularly infuriated Rohrbough. When the Rocky Mountain News asked what he thought about Zanis removing all the crosses, Rohrbough replied, “[Zanis] should have left the thirteen other crosses standing…Instead of doing the right thing to honor the victims of those two murderers, he comes back and tears down the whole thing.”88 Like much of the bereaved Columbine community, Rohrbough found Zanis’ crosses for the innocent victims of the Columbine Massacre comforting and thoughtful. Thus, by removing the whole cross memorial, Zanis had disrespected those who died at the hands of Harris and Klebold according to Rohrbough. Zanis’ decision to take away a memorial that he had supposedly built for the Columbine community without consulting anyone else also raised the issue of who owned the crosses. Zanis seemed to regard himself as the rightful owner of the crosses since he had made them. Yet, Zanis had manufactured this Christian-inspired symbol for Columbine and many in southern Jefferson County began to regard it as their memorial—a memorial they hoped

87 Greg Zanis, “Interview about Community Response to the Crosses,” quoted in Wendy M. Zoba, Day of Reckoning: Columbine and the Search for America’s Soul (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 50.
to have back. Regardless of ownership, the crosses seemed to have finally become the faith-based memorial that unified rather than divided the Columbine community.

Recognizing how important the thirteen crosses were to many in the Columbine community, Zanis decided he would return them to Rebel Hill. However, he would only return them if he and Rohrbough could resolve their conflict. Accordingly, Zanis contacted Rohrbough and arranged to meet him in Denver on May 15. When they first met, Rohrbough expressed hostility towards Zanis, rejecting his efforts at reconciliation. While describing the encounter to Zoba, Zanis recalled telling Rohrbough, “I’m sorry.” According to Zanis, in response to his apology, “He was yelling at me, ‘How dare you put up a murderer’s cross by my son’s cross!...I’m not going to forgive you. You were crazy when you did that.’” Rohrbough felt too indignant that his son’s murderer had been memorialized alongside his son that he would not even consider forgiving Zanis for designing such a memorial. Realizing that Rohrbough had no intentions of accepting an apology, Zanis tried reasoning with him and explaining why he had returned to Colorado. Zanis remembered telling Rohrbough, “I’m asking for you to forgive me…I’m here with thirteen crosses and I’m going to put them up today.” Even after hearing that his son’s cross had been returned, Rohrbough continued to reject Zanis’ apology. According to Zanis, Rohrbough responded, “‘Sorry’s not enough…I don’t care what you do.’” Because of Rohrbough’s consistently negative responses, Zanis worried that they would not be able to find a common ground through the meeting.

---

89 Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine*, 51.
90 Cullen, *Columbine*, 194.
Since he had built the crosses as a forum for healing and forgiveness in the Columbine community, Zanis really wanted to replace them on Rebel Hill during his trip to achieve those ends. Because he felt so strongly about returning the crosses, Zanis tried once more to make amends with Rohrbough. He decided to tell Rohrbough that he planned to take the crosses back to Illinois if they couldn’t reach an agreement. Zanis remembered that once Rohrbough finished yelling at him he responded, “Listen, I’ve asked you as a Christian brother to forgive me and you haven’t. I’m tired of you yelling at me…I’m going to pack my crosses and go back to Illinois. But I want to ask you one more time, are you or are you not a Christian brother? And are you going to forgive me or not?”95 This time, Zanis succeeded. In appealing to their common religion and threatening to take the victims’ crosses away again, Zanis finally got through to Rohrbough. After saying this to Rohrbough, the two men “hugged and cried together.”96 Rohrbough accepted the apology so long as Zanis returned the thirteen crosses to Rebel Hill and agreed to never build a cross to any murderers ever again.97 At the end of the meeting, it seemed as if the conflict between Zanis and Rohrbough had been resolved and the crosses could be returned to Rebel Hill. Theoretically, the Columbine community would be able to unite around the thirteen victim’s crosses again as Zanis had initially intended.

Despite the potential for reconciliation between Zanis and Rohrbough at the end of the meeting, the thirteen crosses never made it back to Rebel Hill. Recalling the problems the crosses had caused the first time they were in Clement Park, the Foothills Park and Recreation District—the agency responsible for Clement Park—refused to allow Zanis to replace his crosses on Rebel Hill.98 The Park and Recreation District cited safety concerns about people slipping and

97 Larkin, Comprehending Columbine, 52.
98 Larkin, Comprehending Columbine, 52.
falling on Rebel Hill when it became wet and muddy. More importantly, though, the Park and Recreation District invoked the Establishment Clause to prevent the crosses from being displayed at a publically funded park.

Having resolved his conflict with Rohrbough, Zanis wanted to keep his promise and return the victims’ crosses to Clement Park. In an effort to counter the argument about the separation of church and state, Zanis sued the Park and Recreation District for violating his freedom of expression to display his crosses at Clement Park. It took two years for Colorado U.S. District Court to hear the case. During the interim before the hearing, Zanis had to store the thirteen crosses at his Crosses for Losses property in Illinois to ensure that no one would covertly replace them at Clement Park. After two years of waiting, Zanis lost the case. According to an article in the *First Amendment Center*, the day after the hearing, “Greg Zanis lost a court battle yesterday [April 19, 2001] to erect the crosses in a park adjacent to Columbine High School when U.S. District Judge Richard Matsch rejected his contention that he was being banned from a public forum.” After making amends with Rohrbough and patiently waiting for two years to rectify the controversy he had created by including fifteen crosses in his original memorial, Zanis was unable to do so because the U.S. District Court of appeals ruled in favor of upholding the Establishment Clause. Recognizing how much time it had taken for this hearing to happen, Zanis decided not to appeal the case. As a result, Zanis’ thirteen crosses have never been returned to Clement Park. Although he begrudgingly agreed not to return the crosses to Clement Park, Zanis disagreed with the ruling. In protest of the prohibition of his crosses from Rebel Hill, Zanis has paraded the crosses around the country and brought them to annual Columbine anniversaries

---

99 Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine*, 52.
100 Cullen, *Columbine*, 195.
ever since as a way to protest. Since the case only banned him from permanently displaying the crosses in a public space, there was little the Park and Recreation District could do to prevent him from bringing the crosses there every year.\textsuperscript{102} In an interview with the \textit{Rocky Mountain News} just after losing the case, Zanis explained that he planned to bring the crosses back to Colorado yearly because “we’re [nosism] standing up for freedom of religion and freedom of speech,” without violating the court order.\textsuperscript{103}

The controversies Zanis created by including crosses to the shooters alongside crosses to Columbine victims harkens back to a dilemma that arose in Oklahoma City in the aftermath of the Bombing. Linenthal examined debates amongst Oklahomans over whether the City should leave the ruins of the Murrah Building standing as a reminder of the sheer horrors of that day or demolish the ruins and use that space for another purpose. The arguments about whether Harris and Klebold should have been memorialized or not and what Oklahoma City ought to do with the Murrah Building entailed similar thought processes but advocated opposite means of furthering these goals.

Oklahomans who supported tearing down the ruins of the Murrah believed Oklahoma City should build something else there and begin moving forward. According to Linenthal, advocates of deconstructing the Murrah’s ruins hoped their city would “rebuild…[since] a new building would signal defiance of terrorism.”\textsuperscript{104} These residents wanted to heal from the trauma the Bombing had caused as quickly as possible by utilizing the space. They did not want to allow the terrorists to strike long-term fear into the community. Keeping the ruins standing, these residents argued, only prolonged Oklahoma City’s focus on the destructive events of April 19,

\textsuperscript{102} The Associated Press, “Columbine Memorial Crosses,” 1.
\textsuperscript{104} Linenthal, \textit{The Unfinished Bombing}, 136.
1995. This argument was similar to that of Columbine community members who responded positively towards Zanis’ two crosses for the shooters on Rebel Hill as a gesture of reconciliation. Like the Oklahomans who advocated tearing down the Murrah to build something new, these members of the Columbine community believed retaining the shooters’ crosses and expressing positive messages on them would allow the Columbine community to move beyond blame and begin healing from the Columbine Massacre.

In contrast to Oklahomans who wanted to tear down the Murrah and replace it with a new building, many championed preserving the Building’s remnants. Linenthal noted that people who wanted to keep the Murrah standing often “spoke of the site as ‘sacred ground.’ Rebuilding there, conducting business as usual, would defile the site...[whereas] the ruins would be an evocative reminder of loss, and the enduring dangers of violence.”¹⁰⁵ These residents viewed the Murrah Building itself as a memorial that powerfully spoke to the sheer happening of the event. These residents saw altering the site of the Murrah or its wreckage in anyway as akin to defiling a holy relic.

Though achieved through opposite means, leaving the Murrah’s ruins standing aimed to accomplish a similar goal to Rohrbough when he removed the shooters’ crosses from Rebel Hill. Rohrbough cut down these crosses because he believed they only served to “cheapen what Christ did for us by honoring murders with crosses.”¹⁰⁶ In Rohrbough’s opinion, by building crosses for unrepentant murderers, Zanis had defiled a sacred relic. Therefore, the shooters’ crosses were an unacceptable and profane way to memorialize Columbine. Similarly, some Oklahomans believed that destroying the Murrah equated to ruining a sacred site. Accordingly, they opposed proposals to replace the Murrah with something else. Whether through deconstruction or preservation, both

¹⁰⁵ Linenthal, The Unfinished Bombing, 136.
impacted communities wanted appropriately sacrosanct memorials for their traumatic incident. Clearly, members of the bereaved Oklahoma and Columbine communities were divided over how to materially memorialize the tragic historical events they had lived through.

Although Zanis initially built his fifteen crosses as a site of healing and reconciliation for the Columbine community, his choice to include crosses to the shooters next to those for victims resulted in the complete opposite. Zanis’ memorial became an unresolved site of contestation amongst the Columbine community that struck deep emotional chords for many. The dialogue that opened up regarding the use of religion in a public space as a result of the crosses would resurface again during the Columbine memorialization process.

**Infamous Last Words**

The Columbine community had to grapple with religious freedom of expression again during the planning phase of the Official Columbine Memorial. Soon after the Columbine Massacre, Americans began discussing a permanent memorial. Proponents hoped the memorial would both serve as a place of healing and prevent future generations from forgetting what happened that tragic day.¹⁰⁷ Many people were quite eager to have the official memorial constructed sooner rather than later. In fact, according to the director of the Columbine Memorial Foundation Laura Knowlton, “nearly $100,000 in unsolicited donations came in within the first couple months after the shootings.”¹⁰⁸ These donations arrived before an official memorial had even been announced. In order to manage these funds and centralize the planning process for an official memorial, Knowlton chartered the Columbine Memorial Foundation on August 1, 1999.

and decided to open membership to anyone. This approach helped the Foundation grow quickly. According to the Foundation’s website, by the start of 2000 the Foundation had nearly 75 active members.¹⁰⁹ Having a small but growing endowment and membership base, the Foundation was ready to begin planning an official memorial to the Columbine Massacre.

To guide the planning phase of the memorial, the members of the Columbine Memorial Foundation collectively agreed upon four guiding principles to guide their work. First, and foremost, the Foundation wanted, “To create of a respectful place where family members, members of the community and visitors could go to gain an understanding of the innocent victims of Columbine.”¹¹⁰ Second, the Foundation hoped, “To create a memorial with content and purpose 100% derived from members of the Columbine community, and keeping with the scale, materials and natural forms found in the Columbine area.”¹¹¹ Since a memorial cannot honor every person impacted by an event, the Foundation delineated the scope of coverage in the Official Columbine Memorial intending, “to recognize and honor the deceased, the injured, the survivors and the community members.”¹¹² Focusing on these groups, the Foundation believed, would make the memorial the most poignant. Finally, the Foundation made a commitment “to incorporate the Columbine ‘Never Forgotten’ Ribbon in the concept design for the memorial.”¹¹³ This would visually affirm the Foundation’s commitment to keep Columbine alive in American memory. Combined, the Foundation’s four guiding principles helped members plan the memorial in a manner as sensitive as possible for the Columbine community.

Upon initial consideration, the Foundation’s guidelines appear well suited to prevent controversy from arising in the memorialization process. This seems especially likely given that

¹¹² Knowlton, Development History,” 3.
¹¹³ Knowlton, Development History,” 3.
members of the Columbine community had a voice in the guidelines and design. According to Knowlton, “[Community] feedback in the memorial design was solicited through surveys” that the Foundation used determine the general design of the Memorial. The Foundation envisaged an overall framework for the memorial as two concentric circles made from local granite and marble nestled into the base of Rebel Hill and connected by the “Never Forgotten” ribbon.\(^{114}\) The foundation wanted the inner ring to serve as a “Ring of Remembering” while the outer ring would become a “Ring of Healing” for the Columbine Massacre\(^ {115}\) Through this design, the Foundation hoped the Official Columbine Memorial would help visitors come to terms with yet continue to remember the Columbine Massacre.

This tentative design for the Official Columbine Memorial conforms to the aesthetics of other late twentieth century memorials to traumatic events. According to art historian Erika Doss’ book *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, “Minimalism has become the unofficial language of contemporary commemoration.”\(^ {116}\) Doss found that this artistic mode has become especially popular for contemporary memorials dealing with “terrorism, trauma, and tragic death.”\(^ {117}\) Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial design set the trend for minimalism as the primary approach for traumatic memorial designs. In describing the Vietnam Memorial, Doss notes, “its horizontal design and black stone challenge conventional styles of commemoration.”\(^ {118}\) The black granite wall “acknowledges the trauma of a particularly divisive, much despised, and politically protested war by listing the [58, 253] names of America’s soldier dead in incantatory fashion.”\(^ {119}\) Lin’s abstract design, conceptually, allowed for a more reflective

---

\(^{114}\) Knowlton, “Answers to Columbine Memorial Questionnaire,” 32.

\(^{115}\) Laura Knowlton, “Memorial Design,” *Columbine Memorial Foundation Inc.*, January 1, 2011, 1.


\(^{117}\) Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 123.

\(^{118}\) Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 130.

\(^{119}\) Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 130.
and personal experience than a literal image of a soldier would have for visitors. In quantifying the number of dead, Lin’s piece conveyed the horrific nature of the Vietnam War but did not make an explicit judgment about Vietnam.

Perhaps recognizing how powerful this non-representational memorial to commemorate Vietnam was, Oklahoma City National Memorial employed a minimalist design to commemorate the Bombing. Doss described the Oklahoma Memorial as consisting of “a 318-foot long reflecting pool, tiled with black granite…faced on one side by the memorial’s dominant design feature: 168 bronze and glass chairs, each etched with the name of a victim.”

In line with minimalist aesthetics, the Oklahoma City Memorial does not have any literal representations of people. Instead, the slowly flowing pool offers a message of washing away tragedy, while the empty chairs quantify the loss felt from this memorial. Through minimalist design, then, the Oklahoma City National Memorial both serves as a site of working through trauma and remembering those who died without providing a concrete image of either the people who were killed or the building that was demolished in the Bombing.

The design of the Official Columbine Memorial was based largely on minimalist design. The Memorial did not have any representational elements of the Columbine victims, the shooters, or Columbine High School. Instead, the Official Columbine Memorial used black granite slabs, the “Columbine Never Forgotten” ribbon, and concentric circles as abstract representations of the absence of the thirteen victims from the Columbine community while simultaneously gesturing towards healing and remembrance.

The design of the Official Columbine Memorial reflects minimalist motifs in ways beyond the abstract framework. According to Doss, “Naming is typically used in contemporary

---

120 Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 137.
memorials” based on minimalism. The Foundation incorporated this trend into the Columbine Memorial. Knowlton noted that the Foundation chose to allow “each of the victim’s families…[to] provide a unique and personal reflection in text that would honor their loved one.” These reflections would be etched into the walls along the perimeter of the Ring of Remembering. Thus, the Ring of Remembering both listed the victims’ names and provided a description of them; it expanded upon trends in minimalist aesthetics. Similarly, for the Ring of Healing, the Foundation wanted to honor those who were injured during the Columbine Massacre by including “many engraved stones with quotes from students, the community, parents, first responders, and other notable statements that were made” in the wake of the Massacre. In keeping with minimalist design, the Ring of Healing would include names of those impacted by Columbine accompanied by a quote.

By allowing Columbine community members to include words with their names, the Foundation ensured that the Memorial would indeed be derived entirely from members of the Columbine community—in line with the Foundation’s mission statement. Incorporating the Columbine community’s quotes into the Memorial also reflects an important aspect of minimalist memorial design. Doss argues that minimalism has become such a popular form of expression in recent memorials because the style “generates strong feelings of social relevance and public ‘ownership’…because of its participatory and experiential dimensions.” In allowing the families to determine the way in which their lost ones would be remembered, the Foundation granted the Columbine community a large degree of public ownership and participation in the memorialization process. To ensure that each of the victims’ families had a relatively equal chance to participate in the memorialization process, the Foundation allotted each family 200

---

121 Doss, Memorial Mania, 150.
123 Knowlton, “Memorial Design,” 2.
words for their inscription in the Ring of Remembering. Hoping to prevent controversial messages from arising, while still wanting to allow families plenty of latitude in commemorating their loved ones, Knowlton asked families to “keep it [the Memorial] tasteful and respectful” through their commentary. Because Knowlton’s recommendation was so vague, families still had a great deal of freedom in commemorating their loved ones.

Since Christianity played such an integral part in the Columbine community’s lives, a number of families proposed incorporating Christian rhetoric into their inscriptions to make the Memorial more relevant to their lives. Despite the fact that the Official Columbine Memorial would be located on public property, Knowlton recognized that her guidelines had not ruled against religious rhetoric. Therefore, the Foundation accepted tastefully written inscriptions containing Christian messages. For instance, part of the proposed inscription for Cassie Bernall read, “Cassie truly longed to know what heaven would be like and she strived to know the Lord whom she would meet there.” The Bernall’s statement emphasized what they believed was an integral part of their daughter’s identity and they hoped visitors to the Memorial would remember her for that characteristic. The Foundation accepted the comment, believing the Bernall’s had made it in good taste.

Like the Bernall family, the proposed inscription for victim Corey DePooter included a religious reference. At one point, the DePooters remarked, “Corey looked forward to becoming a husband and a father and sharing his faith with his children.” The Foundation believed that

125 Laura Knowlton, “Recommendations for Ring of Remembering,” quoted in Dave Cullen, Columbine (New York: Twelve Publishing, 2009), 357.
this section of the DePooter’s quote drew attention to the importance of religion in their son’s life in a tasteful manner, and therefore, accepted the quote without modification. Eight other proposed inscriptions for the victims used Christian language such as “God, Christ, and Heaven,” to characterize them. As with the Bernalls and DePooters, seven of these families used such Christian ideology respectfully, so the Foundation accepted these proposed inscriptions. Since the Foundation never established guidelines prohibiting religious expression in the families’ commemorative etchings, Knowlton accepted all but one Christian inspired commemorative inscription without reservations.

Despite the generally positive messages that Christian language conveyed in most of the families’ eulogies, one of the commemorative statements espoused a rather controversial religious agenda in the absence of strict content guidelines from the Foundation. Daniel Rohrbough’s parents had divorced several years before Columbine and decided to submit separate reflections about their son that would together add up to 200 words. Rohrbough’s mom, Sue Petrone, composed a tasteful reflection about her son that described all the things she would miss about him such as his “engaging smile and beautiful blue eyes.” As with many of the victims’ families, Petrone used Christian language in her inscription characterizing her son as “a precious gift from God.” Since Petrone’s use of religious language offered a positive way in which to remember her son, the Foundation accepted her section of the inscription as submitted.

In contrast to his wife’s benign eulogy that focused on Daniel Rohrbough, Brian Rohrbough submitted an inscription with a politically charged Christian message. Because of the

129 Cullen, Columbine, 357.
more hostile religious message in Rohrbough’s tentative inscription, the Foundation questioned its appropriateness for the Official Columbine Memorial. Based on a combination of a real and imagined conversation between Rohrbough and his son, his proposed inscription read

[Real] “Dad, I have a question. Why?”
[Imagined Answer] My son in a Nation that legalized the killing of innocent children in the womb; in a Country where authorities would lie and cover up what they knew and what they did; in a Godless school system your life was taken... Dan I’m sorry.
[Real] “I love you dad I’ll see you tomorrow.” 7:00 p.m., April 19, 1999.
“There is no peace,” says the Lord, “for the wicked.” Isaiah 48:22

Unlike his wife and all the other families who used their inscriptions to describe their loved ones, Rohrbough hardly described his son at all. Rather, Rohrbough used his one hundred words as a tirade against the moral vices of secular American society that he believed had enabled Columbine to occur. Rohrbough’s message misaligned with the Foundation’s intentions to make the Memorial a place of remembrance and healing. Rather than offering a message of hope or a positive commentary about his son, Rohrbough implied that events similar to Columbine would continue to occur so long as the United States allowed abortions and kept schools secular.

Rohrbough’s message also ran counter to an important trend in contemporary memorials. According to Doss, contemporary memorials tend to be, “orchestrated narratives of select traumas aligned with notions of social reconciliation and national redemption.” Rohrbough’s proposed inscription, by contrast, rejected reconciliation between the Columbine community and Harris and Klebold by condemning the shooters to Hell. Because Rohrbough’s tentative message did not seem particularly tasteful, compared to the other proposed inscriptions, his imagined

133 Doss, Memorial Mania, 131.
conversation came under strict scrutiny.

Rohrbough knew his tentative inscription would meet with resistance from some members of the Columbine community as soon as he had finished writing it. In an interview with the *Rocky Mountain News* in June 2007 after he had decided on the contents of his inscription, Rohrbough remarked, “Some people will hate it and think it’s inappropriate, and many more will look at it and like it.” Rohrbough did not want to submit an inscription simply to please visitors. Rather, he wanted to impart a message that he and his son would regard as important. As Rohrbough predicted, almost as soon as the Foundation read his proposed epitaph, the members voiced concerns about its content. When asked by the *Rocky Mountain News* about his quote’s reception from the Foundation later that month, Rohrbough explained, “The panel doesn’t object to the Bible verse but has asked me to ‘soften’ the message.” Rohrbough’s inscription incited such controversy because he used it to attack moral values in American society in a memorial that was supposed to have a tasteful tone.

Since Rohrbough was the only family member to submit a quote articulating an angry and potentially controversial message, the Foundation decided to discuss the contents of his inscription with him. When asked what the Foundation thought about Rohrbough’s inscription in an interview with the *Rocky Mountain News*, its lawyer Paul Rufien believed the content “is at least in a gray area [and] that caused me to have my conversation with Brian [Rohrbough].” Rufien assured Rohrbough, however, that the Foundation would take into account how vague Knowlton’s directions had been when deciding whether or not to accept the inscription without

---

135 Brian Rohrbough, “Comments on Memorial Quote,” 1.
Despite Rufien’s diplomacy during their initial conversation on June 1, 2007, Rohrbough reacted defensively. Rohrbough argued that as a part of the Columbine community he should not have to alter his inscription because the Foundation’s mission statement called for content “100% derived from members of the Columbine community.” To make it clear that he intended to keep his message, Rohrbough threatened to sue the Foundation for violating his freedom of expression if he were asked to modify his inscription in any way. Thus, the initial conversation between Rufien and Rohrbough about the inscription ended with a potential lawsuit.

In spite of the tense situation after the first meeting, the lawsuit between Rohrbough and the Foundation never came to fruition. When the Rocky Mountain News asked Rufien about the Foundation’s progress in making a decision about Rohrbough’s inscription a week after the meeting, Rufien conceded that the Foundation hadn’t reached a consensus because Rohrbough’s “Response has caused us to have to pause and…put it in the context of that commitment that was made to the families and then, again, ultimately try and make the right decision” about the content of the Memorial. Rufien recognized that the Foundation had made a commitment to emphasize content created by the Columbine community before Knowlton specified what this content could include. Still, the Foundation questioned whether the message in Rohrbough’s inscription diverged too much from Knowlton’s guidelines to be displayed without some editing. Since a modified inscription from Rohrbough would technically still reflect content derived from the Columbine community, the Foundation realized it would not be abandoning its mission statement in requesting revisions. Nevertheless, after nearly a month of deliberation, a majority

137 Cullen, Columbine, 357.
138 Cullen, Columbine, 357.
139 Cullen, Columbine, 357.
of the Foundation’s members decided to accept Rohrbough’s originally proposed inscription. When Denver’s NBC 9 News asked the Foundation how they had reached their decision on June 28th, Rufien responded that a majority of the members believed “the text fit the vision of the Memorial, a vision of remembrance.”\footnote{Paul Rufien, “Comments on Accepting Rohrbough’s Proposed Quote,” June 28, 2007 quoted in Jeffrey Wolf, “Father of Columbine Victim Can Use Own Words on Memorial,” \textit{Denver’s 9 News}, June 28, 2007, 2.} Certainly, the inscription offered a different way for visitors to the Memorial to reflect on the Columbine Massacre than all the other etchings did. Because the Foundation had accepted Rohrbough’s inscription, it proceeded with constructing the Official Columbine Memorial in July 2007. As planned from the start, all the families’ eulogies were engraved into granite slabs that would form the walls of the Ring of Remembering.

The Official Columbine Memorial opened with minimal controversies. On September 21, 2007, members of the Columbine community convened at Clement Park in mid-afternoon to dedicate the Memorial.\footnote{Cullen, \textit{Columbine}, 357.} The Foundation gave each family an opportunity to comment on their deceased member if they so chose. Many families chose not to, believing their inscriptions would speak for themselves.\footnote{Cullen, \textit{Columbine}, 358.} Not surprisingly, Rohrbough wanted to comment on his inscription. While discussing his quote, Rohrbough concluded, “Many will look at it and like it, and even more will look at it and consider what it has to say—and 50 years down the road what it has to say will be more valuable.”\footnote{Brian Rohrbough, “Introduction to Memorial Inscription,” September 21, 2007 quoted in Sandra Fish, “Columbine Memorial-Pro Life Connection Missed?” \textit{The Colorado Independent}, September 21, 2007, 1.} Rohrbough believed that his son’s inscription conveyed an important and timeless message about the social context within America that made the Columbine Massacre possible.

Rufien did not share the same level of enthusiasm for the etching as Rohrbough but still
stood behind the Foundation’s decision to retain the original text. When CBS News asked him what he thought about Rohrbough’s half of the inscription being permanently etched into the Ring of Remembering, Rufien explained, “It was the way he wanted to remember his son” and the Official Columbine Memorial “is the place for it, and that’s where it will always be.”

Because Rohrbough’s inscription matched the purpose of the Ring of Remembering, as a place to reflect on the Columbine Massacre, Rufien stood behind it despite the controversial message it professed.

Rohrbough’s inscription did not elicit much of a reaction from the Columbine community at the Memorial itself on opening day. Reflecting on his visit to the dedication ceremony and his observations on how visitors responded to Rohrbough’s inscription, Cullen noted, “A few thousand visitors filed quietly past the inner wall [Ring of Remembering]. There was no ruckus over the angry inscription. It did not draw more onlookers than the other twelve, even out of curiosity.” Although the content of Rohrbough’s etching certainly stood out from all the other inscriptions, visitors to the Official Columbine Memorial chose to reflect on his words silently instead of allowing it to create a public controversy in what was intended for a space of remembrance and healing. Despite the Foundation’s concerns about Rohrbough’s inscription causing a disturbance at the Columbine Memorial, his etching did not seem to bother visitors.

Although Rohrbough’s engraving did not create divisions within the Columbine community at the opening of Official Columbine Memorial, the content sparked heated debate amongst Coloradoans online. The day the Memorial opened, Rocky Mountain News columnist Mark Wolf posted the full text of Rohrbough’s remarks on his forum and asked readers, “Is the

---

146 Cullen, Columbine, 358.
inscription appropriate for the memorial?"\textsuperscript{147} Contributors responding to the question expressed opposing views. A number of readers voiced annoyance towards the Rohrbough’s inscription. One of the contributors to the forum who went by Viggo posed the rhetorical question, “Abortion caused Columbine? Really? He really believes that?"\textsuperscript{148} Viggo’s comment shows that he felt Rohrbough had blamed the Columbine Massacre on the wrong things. In Viggo’s opinion, Rohrbough’s etching did not fit in with the rest of the Memorial because it was so disconnected from the actual causes of Columbine. Echoing Viggo’s response, forum member Uncommon Sense posted, “I too disagree with the ‘godless/abortion’ connections to Columbine…It makes any discussion of the real causes of this tragedy more difficult."\textsuperscript{149} Uncommon Sense regarded Rohrbough’s inscription as inappropriate for the Columbine Memorial because the message obfuscated the causes of the Massacre. That seemed an illogical thing to include in the memorial to Uncommon Sense, given that the Ring of Remembering was supposed to serve as a reminder of Columbine for future generations. For many respondents on the \textit{Rocky Mountain News} forum, then, Rohrbough’s engraving was too dogmatic for a memorial geared towards healing and remembrance for the collective Columbine community.

On balance, many contributors supported the Foundation’s decision to use Rohrbough’s original inscription in the Memorial. For instance, respondent Dawn M. believed, “Harris and Klebold grew up in the culture we created. That culture allows and encourages the killing of children…Mr. Rohrbough’s inscription was absolutely appropriate.”\textsuperscript{150} Unlike detractors, Dawn M. felt the inscription accurately characterized the prevailing social conditions that made

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{149} Uncommon Sense [pseudo.], comment on “Rohrbough Expects Memorial Words to Spark Conversation,” \textit{Rocky Mountain News}, comment posted September 21, 2007, 4.
\textsuperscript{150} Dawn M. [pseudo.], comment on “Rohrbough Expects Memorial Words to Spark Conversation,” \textit{Rocky Mountain News}, comment posted September 21, 2007, 3.
\end{flushleft}
Columbine possible. Therefore, in her opinion, Rohrbough’s etching was appropriate for the Ring of Remembering. Other forum members shared Dawn M.’s outlook towards the content of Rohrbough’s inscription. The contributor Lisa argued, “People should really wake up to what is going on in this world & get back to the values we’re supposed to hold…Thank you Brian [Rohrbough] for putting your comments on something that will be viewed by thousands & possibly change someone’s life.” Lisa wanted the Columbine Massacre to be remembered as an instance of violence precipitated by a lack of morality in America, and therefore regarded Rohrbough’s message appropriate for the Memorial.

The debates about Rohrbough’s inscription echo back to the early phases of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Veterans Fund decided to have an open juried contest to determine the official design for the memorial. When Maya Lin’s black granite “V” won the contest, controversy erupted amongst Americans invested in the Memorial design. A number of Vietnam veterans and conservative politicians disliked the design because of its abstract rather than heroic representation of Vietnam veterans. James Webb, one of the key figures in charge of funding the Vietnam Veterans Memorials, accused Lin of designing “a Wailing Wall for future antidraft and anti-nuclear demonstrations.” Webb worried that while Lin’s design itself did not advance a particular political agenda, the absence of a celebratory tone could easily be construed as a disrespectful message towards the Vietnam War. Vietnam veteran Tom Carhart expressed similar distaste for Lin’s memorial design. In an editorial to the New York Times, Carhart lamented that Lin’s design was “pointedly insulting to the sacrifices made to this country by all

---

151 Lisa [pseudo.], comment on Rohrbough Expects Memorial Words to Spark Conversation,” Rocky Mountain News, comment posted September 21, 2007, 2.
153 Hass, Carried to the Wall, 13.
Vietnam Veterans by this we will be remembered: a black gash of shame and sorrow, hacked into the national visage that is the Mall." Carhart believed Lin’s design did convey politically hostile undertones about the Vietnam War. Detractors of Lin’s design generally believed that minimalism was an inappropriate means to commemorate veterans. Instead, they wanted a representational heroic design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

While many people opposed Lin’s design, others believed it was the most appropriate way to commemorate Vietnam. Lin’s abstract design seemed like the best way to avoid making political statements in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Universal Press Syndicate columnist James Kilpatrick appreciated the Memorial’s abstract design: “Each of us may remember what he wishes to remember—the cause, the heroism, the blunders, or the waste.” Because Lin did not make any direct commentary about the Vietnam War, visitors to the Memorial would be able to craft their own history. Similar to Kilpatrick, Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs, who proposed the Memorial and wrote the memoir *To Heal a Nation*, approved of Lin’s minimalist design because, “The memorial says exactly what we want to say about Vietnam—absolutely nothing.” While Lin’s design for the Memorial may not have offered a heroic narrative of Vietnam per se, it also refrained from criticizing the War. Scruggs believed that this silence was the best anyone could hope for with a Vietnam memorial given how controversial the War had been amongst Americans. As can be seen from the contentions over Lin’s design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the debates that Rohrbough’s inscription incited within the Columbine community were not unique to the Official Columbine Memorial. Rather, controversies are commonplace.

---

during the creation process of contemporary trauma memorials.

Although the Columbine Memorial Foundation’s initial guidelines for planning the Official Columbine Memorial were designed to prevent controversies from arising, subsequent directions proved too vague to achieve this goal. This was especially true when the Foundation decided to incorporate quotes from the victims’ families but did not explicitly state the content its members regarded as inappropriate for the Memorial. Because of this lack of clarity, Rohrbough used his etching as an opportunity to decry immorality in American society and the Foundation had no specific reason to prevent him from doing so. Despite its intended purpose as a place for community healing and reflection, the Official Columbine Memorial became a divisive arena amongst the Columbine community once the Foundation accepted Rohrbough’s hostile religiously-inspired inscription.

**Incomplete Resolution a Decade Later**

Though quite divisive and contentious for many years after the Columbine Massacre, religiously inspired commemorative efforts for Columbine gradually shifted towards more of a unifying force. On the evening of the ten year anniversary of Columbine on April 20, 2009, the Columbine community reconvened at the Official Columbine Memorial to recognize this milestone. The Columbine Memorial Foundation selected former president Bill Clinton, who had been president during the Columbine Massacre, as the keynote speaker for the occasion. Even though he was an outsider to southern Jefferson County and more politically liberal than many in attendance at the ten year anniversary ceremony, Clinton incorporated religious sentiment into his opening address. Clinton began by proclaiming, “I am here today because millions of Americans were changed by Columbine…It was one of the darkest days Hillary and I had in the
White House. We wept, we prayed for God’s counsel.”158 Like numerous commemorative efforts to the Columbine Massacre prior to this speech, Clinton responded to Columbine in a Christian manner. He suggested that the terror Columbine had struck in America was too great to comprehend without divine consolation. Later in his speech, Clinton again referenced the role of religion in the healing process after Columbine asserting, “The strength and resolve of your small community has been a beacon of hope and a model for love and faith that has inspired people the world over in their own times of darkness and despair.”159 Again, Clinton suggested that the Columbine community came out as strong as they had because of their devotion to their faith—Christianity. In contrast to previous iterations of Christian-inspired Columbine memorialization efforts in which members of the Columbine community were divided over its use, all in attendance at the ten-year ceremony silently listened to Clinton’s speech without raising objections to his religious references. When Clinton finished his speech, the gathering of nearly one thousand mourners all stood silently and hung their heads in reverence.160 Clinton’s religious rhetoric seemed to unify rather than cleave apart the Columbine community now that they had had ten years to heal.

Clinton’s speech was not the only instance of memorialization infused with Christian rhetoric during Columbine’s ten-year anniversary celebration. Like the speech, these other commemorative efforts caused few disturbances during the ceremony. The Columbine community’s increased acceptance of religiously-inspired commemoratives can be seen in their neutral reaction towards a hagiography about Columbine’s first casualty, Rachel Scott, that the publisher distributed at the ten-year celebration. Titled Rachel’s Tears: Ten Years After

*Columbine Rachel’s Faith Still Lives On,* the book framed Scott as a Christian martyr. Like *She Said Yes,* *Rachel’s Tears* claimed that certain Columbine survivors had witnessed Harris ask Scott whether she believed in God or not, to which she replied, “You know I do.” As with the Bernall story, after Scott answered in the affirmative, Harris laughed and shot her at point blank range. Although the editor, Beth Nimmo, brought *Rachel’s Tears* to the ten-year anniversary celebration, no one stopped to argue with her about the book’s contents. Instead, people who doubted that Scott had died a martyr simply walked past her. While *She Said Yes* had opened up a massive debate in the Columbine community about what actually happened in the library during the Columbine Massacre, after a decade, the community had less of a need to challenge the validity of a book’s contents. Having had a longer time to work through their trauma, the Columbine community was more willing to accept various interpretations of the Columbine Massacre.

The closing ceremony for the ten-year Columbine anniversary celebration was also religiously inspired, yet it unified the Columbine Community. To close, Littleton priest Dave McPherson—who had defended Bernall’s martyrdom narrative even in the face of conflicting accounts ten years earlier—led a candlelight vigil and moment of silent prayer for Columbine victims and survivors. If some of the attendees at the ten-year anniversary ceremony disagreed with the religious connotations of this closing, there are no reports of them creating a disturbance. It seemed that the religiously-inspired commemorative processes intended to draw the Columbine community together in the wake of the Columbine Massacre were finally accomplishing that goal.

---

162 Associated Press, “A Day of Remembrance 10 Years after Columbine,” 2.
164 Associated Press, “A Day of Remembrance 10 Years after Columbine,” 2.
While the Columbine community generally seemed ready to accept Christian influenced commemoration by the ten-year anniversary, not all wounds had healed; controversy still arose over faith-based memorials towards the end of the ceremony. Back in May 1999 Rohrbough forgave Zanis, but he demanded that Zanis “never build another cross for the killers, or for any killer, and would not drive around the country with his crosses.”\(^{165}\) However, within a year of agreeing to these conditions, Zanis began touring around the country with his crosses to small venues that attracted little media attention.\(^{166}\) Accordingly, Rohrbough did not know that Zanis had been breaking his promise for nine years.\(^{167}\)

At the ten-year anniversary celebration, however, Rohrbough found out that Zanis had reneged on his promises. Towards the end of the ceremony, Zanis arrived at Clement Park with fifteen crosses loaded in the back of his truck.\(^{168}\) Soon after Zanis arrived, Rohrbough noticed him and the fifteen crosses and realized Zanis had not kept his word. After the closing ceremony, Rohrbough confronted Zanis and demanded that he leave the ten-year anniversary.\(^{169}\) After this confrontation, Zanis dejectedly left with his crosses and has not returned to southern Jefferson County since then. Once Zanis had departed, Cullen, who was reporting on the ten-year anniversary ceremony for *Salon.Com*, overheard Rohrbough curse Zanis under his breath as, “The opportunist…the most hateful, despicable person who would come to someone else’s tragedy.”\(^{170}\) While, for the most part, religiously inspired memorialization efforts had become less divisive and controversial amongst residents of southern Jefferson County after ten years of healing, Rohrbough never fully came to terms with his son’s death. Unfortunately, seeing Zanis


\(^{166}\) Zoba, *Day of Reckoning*, 51.

\(^{167}\) Zoba, *Day of Reckoning*, 51.

\(^{168}\) Cullen, *Columbine*, 195.

\(^{169}\) Cullen, *Columbine*, 195.

and his crosses only reminded Rohrbough of his loss and how insensitively Zanis had handled it a decade earlier.

The unresolved controversy about Zanis’ crosses in the Columbine community that resurfaced at the ten-year anniversary to the Columbine Massacre harkens to tensions about representation at that reemerged at the ten-year anniversary for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Ever since the idea for a Vietnam Memorial was proposed in 1979, veteran Diane Carlson Evans advocated representing women veterans in some meaningful way in it. Of course, Lin’s Memorial design tried to avoid recognizing any particular group that served in Vietnam by simply listing the names of the deceased in the order in which they had died on the Wall.\textsuperscript{171}

Hoping to for a more concrete representation of female veterans’ role in Vietnam, Evans founded a committee to raise funds and gain support for a Vietnam Women’s Memorial. American Studies scholar Kristin Ann Hass in her book \textit{Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial} suggests, “Evans wanted a women’s memorial because the Wall did not heal the particular, complicated alienation of women veterans that she had experienced, and it did not make women visible at the memorial”—something she hoped an actual women’s memorial might achieve.\textsuperscript{172} Evans and the committee decided they wanted to place four sculptures portraying female veterans near the Memorial Wall so as to add this distinct experience to the official narrative of the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{173}

By the ten-year anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1992, Evans and her colleagues had managed to raise enough money and publicity to begin making the Vietnam Women’s Memorial. However, it would not be officially dedicated until 1993 due to the aesthetic and political criticisms brought against it that caused the Department of Interior to stall.

\textsuperscript{171} Hass, \textit{Carried to the Wall}, 15.
\textsuperscript{172} Hass, \textit{Carried to the Wall}, 19.
\textsuperscript{173} Hass, \textit{Carried to the Wall}, 19.
on dedicating it. Hass notes that the proposed figures of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial were "swiftly written off by art critics for whom the pietà is uninspiring."\textsuperscript{174} At the same time, according to Hass, opponents argued, "A memorial to the women who served in Vietnam...would set a precedent for a whole slew of other 'special interest memorials.'"\textsuperscript{175} Because of the controversy that Evans’ proposed memorial had created about the appropriateness of commemorating a “special interest group” with a design style that did not match the rest of the Memorial, the Department of the Interior ultimately permitted Evans to place the Vietnam Women’s Memorial in a grove of trees three hundred feet from the Wall.\textsuperscript{176} By 1993, then, the gatekeepers of the Vietnam Memorial had decided to permit a memorial specifically for women who served in Vietnam. However, because the United States had not fully come to terms with how the Vietnam War should be represented in public memory, the Women’s Memorial had to be offset from the rest of the Wall to avoid adding controversy to an already divisive war and its remembrance. Both the community impacted by Vietnam and the bereaved Columbine Community had begun to heal from the traumatic events their memorials stood for with the passage of time, but because of the deeply personal nature of these experiences there would always be an underlying degree of tension in representing these events.

With the notable exception of Rohrbough’s hostile reaction towards Zanis, after ten years residents of southern Jefferson County had begun to work through the tragedy and violence that befell their community during the Columbine Massacre. With the passage of time, the Columbine Community had come to accept religiously inspired memorialization efforts to Columbine—for the most part. If members of the Columbine community did continue to disagree with Christian influenced memorialization processes, they no longer publically opposed

\textsuperscript{174} Hass, \textit{Carried to the Wall}, 19.
\textsuperscript{175} Hass, \textit{Carried to the Wall}, 19.
\textsuperscript{176} Hass, \textit{Carried to the Wall}, 19.
it. Instead, a majority of the Columbine community at least acted as though they accepted the multiple narratives for the tragic events of April 20, 1999.

**Conclusion**

Instances of trauma are deeply personal events that impact those who live through them in unique ways. Like the Vietnam War and the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Columbine Massacre was an intensely disturbing moment in American history that struck emotional chords in all who lived through it. Columbine proved especially unnerving for many people because Harris and Klebold took their lives before anyone had an opportunity to ask them about their motives. Having no explanation about Columbine from the perpetrators, Americans have had to create their own explanations and meanings behind this inexplicable act of domestic terrorism. One framework the Columbine community adopted for understanding the shooting was Religion. Accordingly, Christian language and symbolism pervaded much of the memorialization process to the Columbine Massacre.

Yet, religion, as with trauma, tends to be a deeply personal phenomenon for every individual. Because of how differently people imbue meaning to their lives through religion—perhaps not at all if they’re atheists—faith-based commemorative efforts to Columbine generated controversy and contention within the Columbine community. Inevitably, various groups believed that they had applied religion appropriately in the Columbine memorialization process while others vehemently opposed such applications. Not surprisingly, these disagreements about religion often undermined the unifying and healing purpose that memorialization is supposed to serve in the wake of traumas and instead caused controversies and divisions within the bereaved Columbine community.
Part of the reason that the memorialization efforts in the wake of the Columbine Massacre were so controversial is that such commemorative efforts often raised as many questions as they answered. Or the answers they did provide were incomplete at best. What actually happened in the library prior to Bernall’s death? Whose testimony should be considered valid in recounting Bernall’s death given that all of the people who spoke one way or another about Bernall, aside from McPherson, were in the library when she died? Should freedom of expression subsume the Establishment Clause or vice-versa? Should people who commit suicide after killing numerous other people be forgiven or condemned for their behavior? If murderers do constitute victims, how should they be memorialized in comparison to those whom they killed? Is it more important for permanent memorials to convey neutral messages about trauma or allow those who were impacted by trauma to commemorate the event in the manner they find appropriate? All of these questions emerged during the Columbine memorialization process yet none of the various memorials offered a satisfyingly conclusive answer.

Admittedly, with the passage of time the Columbine Community worked through much of the trauma that the Columbine Massacre had caused. By Columbine’s ten-year anniversary, commemorative efforts with religious elements created noticeably less divisions amongst the Columbine community than they had immediately after the shootings. In part, tensions over religiously influenced memorialization decreased by the ten-year anniversary because there were other narratives for the Columbine community to choose from by that point.

Indeed, while this paper focused specifically on Christian influenced memorialization efforts to the Columbine Massacre, this represents only one of many responses to the Columbine Massacre. It is also a response to Columbine that many Americans have heard surprisingly little about. It seems that Bernall and Scott’s alleged martyrdoms, combined with Zanis’ crosses
advocating forgiveness towards fellow Americans for past atrocities, could easily have been co-opted into American popular memory as part of the official Columbine narrative. These positive elements could have overshadowed the community divisions and controversies that emerged from the religiously inspired commemorative efforts to Columbine and transformed the Columbine Massacre into an uplifting story about good American Christians coming together in the wake of an attack by two faithless Americans. However, this redemption narrative did not catch the media’s attention quite enough and has already begun to fall into obscurity in our national memory.

In the initial aftermath of the Columbine Massacre, rather than latching onto the religious dimensions of the Columbine community’s responses to the shootings, the media focused on claims that the Second Amendment, juvenile delinquency, and the way in which American popular culture glorifies violence had caused Columbine. As a result of the media’s heavy emphasis on the violence and deviant youth narrative, it has been enshrined as the Columbine story in national memory. For evidence of the salience of this understanding of the Columbine Massacre, simply ask someone who has not done research on the topic or enter it in a Google search. More than likely, responses to this query will include shoot-em up video games like Doom, dissonant rock music like that of Marilyn Manson, bullying in high schools, the Trench Coat Mafia, Goths, and the Second Amendment.\footnote{Joan Walsh, “What You Never Knew about Columbine,” \textit{Salon.Com}, April 6, 2009, \url{http://www.salon.com/books/int/2009/04/06/cullen} (accessed March 27, 2011), 1.} It is highly unlikely that people will mention \textit{She Said Yes}, Zanis’ fifteen crosses or conflicts over freedom of expression versus the Establishment Clause when asked about the Columbine Massacre. Despite the prominence of the violence and deviant youth narrative, it is not an entirely true account of the causes and consequences of the Columbine Massacre. To his credit, journalist Dave Cullen challenged many
of these popularly held Columbine myths in his book *Columbine*.178

Since Cullen has already addressed the inaccuracies of this popularized narrative about Columbine, I wanted to look at some less examined aspect of the Columbine Massacre. In the research process, I found that some scholarship existed on memorialization processes to the Columbine Massacre already. However, these pieces had not placed Columbine into a historiographical context, and that served as the impetus for this project. In many ways, the controversies that arose from religiously-inspired commemorative efforts to Columbine tied in with contestations over representation at other contemporary memorialization processes for traumatic events, such as the Vietnam War and the Oklahoma City Bombing. Therefore the Columbine Massacre fit into an overarching historiographical framework of late twentieth century trauma memorials.

The congruencies between memorialization efforts for contemporary traumatic events with regards to representational issues is quite remarkable. When Maya Lin’s design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was modified to include representational male sculptures in addition to her initial minimalist design, Lin reflected, “In a funny sense the compromise brings the memorial closer to the truth. What it also memorializes is that people still cannot resolve the war, nor can they separate the issues, the politics from it.”179 The Vietnam War meant so many different things to each American that Lin’s design could not possibly speak to the needs of all and that created controversy during the design phase of the Veterans Memorial. Similarly, in concluding about his findings from research on the Oklahoma City Bombing, Linenthal commented that the Bombing, “threatened deeply rooted convictions of innocence, provoked and focused personal fears, vulnerabilities, and unresolved traumas, became a commodity to be used

in ongoing cultural battles, [and] sparked a tremendous variety of memorial expression.” As with the Vietnam Memorial, the Oklahoma Bombing evoked so many different responses that no one narrative or memorial could adequately characterize the event. Instead, as Linenthal notes several memorials emerged at once after the Bombing framing it in different ways. Both Lin’s and Linenthal’s comments apply to the memorialization process for the Columbine Massacre in many ways due to the contests over representation that erupted in its aftermath. This explains why all three memorialization processes met resistance along the way even if they have finally come to be accepted as at least adequate representations of their respective events.

It will be interesting to see how these issues play out in the dialogue over the 9/11 memorial “Reflecting Absence” which opens this September, given the event’s already contested meanings. The fact that the United States decided to bury the recently assassinated founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, at sea rather than providing him with a more formal burial site on land already suggests that the Nation has concerns over how controversial the memorialization process for 9/11 may become. Burying Bin Laden at sea leaves little room to use his burial site as a rallying point for violence or to contest the design of the memorial since no one really knows exactly where he was buried.

---

180 Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing*, 231.
Bibliography

Primary


“—— citing Luke 23:34.” Quoted in Sylvia Grider, “Public Grief and...

http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/results?hid=119&sid=fd536a13-3d46-4241-bf41-59d204101700%40sessionmgr113&vid=2&bquery=%28JN+%22Anthropology+Today%22+AND+DT+20070601%29&bdata=JmRiPWFwaCZ0eXBIPTEmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZJnJnb3BIPXNpdGU%3d (accessed March 11, 2011).


Knowlton, Laura. “Answers to Columbine Memorial Questionnaire.” (May 2007). Quoted in


——. “Recommendations for Ring of Remembering.” Quoted in Dave Cullen, 


Lisa [pseudo.] Comment on “Rohrbough Expects Memorial Words to Spark Conversation.”


Ritter, Bill. “Columbine Ten Year Anniversary Conclusion.” (April 20, 2009). Quoted in


——. “Reaction to Zanis’ Crosses at the 10 Year Memorial.” April 20, 2009.


http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ThematicMapFramesetServlet?_bm=y&-geo_id=05000US08059&-tm_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_M00090&-
ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-MapEvent=displayBy-&dBy=060-&_lang=en-&_sse=on#?299,184 (accessed February 21, 2011).


Viggo [pseudo.] Comment on “Rohrbough Expects Memorial Words to Spark Conversation.”


Zanis, Greg. “Interview About Community Response to the Crosses.” Quoted in Wendy M.


Secondary


