

THE IMPLICIT RELIGION OF SCHOOL SHOOTINGS: EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS OF PERPETRATORS PRIOR TO THEIR CRIME

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Abstract: The present paper explores which existential concerns emerge in autobiographical documents of school shooters. The perpetrators in this study discuss their hatred of humanity and existential loneliness in their video manifestos, suicide letters, or diary entries. These expressions—called leaking—contain traces of implicit religion which help us to understand strong layers of meaning in this seemingly irrational behavior. The study involves a narrative analysis of the expressions of school shooters to shed more light on the existential dimension of their motives. We discuss the relation between implicit religion and school shootings, with particular attention to religious terminology in shooters' language.

Keywords: school shooting, implicit religion, violence, existential concerns

INTRODUCTION

Since the middle of the twentieth century more than 160 school shootings have occurred worldwide with several hundreds of victims killed and many others wounded. Whole nations wonder why and how these tragedies can happen. Many speculate, but what do we really know about these tragic incidents? Firstly, we have to acknowledge that the available information about school shooters does not add up to a useful profile (O'Toole 2002; Robertz 2004; Vossekuil et al. 2002). This follows in part from the

simple statistical logic that the number of school shootings is relatively low. Known shooters have different family backgrounds and educational histories, the socioeconomic context differs and their age varies between eleven and twenty-five years old (Langman 2009). However, on the basis of previous incidents a number of risk factors can be identified. The majority of school shooters are male, more than half are Caucasian, they have an interest in weapons, like to present themselves in army clothes or black trench coats and are interested in violent movies or computer games. Obviously, these risk factors are applicable to a large number of people and there is no reliable way to pick out the very few who will actually commit a school shooting.

Moreover, a school shooting is never a spontaneous act and usually involves preparation. During this period of planning the perpetrator almost always announces his plans (O'Toole 2002; Pollak 2008; Vossekuij et al. 2002). This is called leaking. Leaking can be indirect, for example in the form of school essays, wearing particular clothes, or presenting themselves with weapons on video clips. It can also be direct, for example, in threats on social media, suicide letters, videos, or manifestos (O'Toole 2002). The internet and especially YouTube plays an important role in leaking. Several school shooters were actively posting messages on YouTube prior to their crime (Oksanen et al. 2014). These expressions contain statements about existential themes like life and death, love and hate, isolation and the struggle with their identity, which can help us to understand the crux of their motives. These expressions have a wide range, from the seemingly trivial "I don't like Mondays" of Brenda Spencer¹ (Grover Cleveland Elementary School shooting, 1979, San Diego) to the embittered words of Sebastian Bosse (Geschwister Scholl school shooting, 2006, Germany), "What is the meaning of life then? Nothing!" (Tagebuch des Sebastian Bosse, *Archiv für Menschenkunde und Sozialpädagogik Rudolf Steiners* 2007).

Existential concerns, as addressed in this paper, are related to views of life and death, the freedom of the individual and responsibility for one's actions, the awareness that one is fundamentally alone, and the problem of meaning. Experimental studies have confirmed that existential concerns have a pervasive influence on people's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski 2006). For example, the fear of losing our own life can make us use violence against others.

¹Perhaps unknown to many, these iconic lines of the 1979 Great Britain number one hit by Irish punk rock band Boomtown Rats actually refer to a school shooting.

Table 1. The five existential concerns and the existential problems they represent (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski 2006)

Existential Concerns	Existential Problem
Death	A psychological conflict between mortality and the desire to live forever
Isolation	A wish to be connected to others versus experiences of being rejected; realization that one's subjective experience of reality can never be fully shared
Identity	A clear sense of who one is and how one fits into the world versus uncertainties because of conflicts between self-aspects, unclear boundaries between self and non-self, or limited self-insight
Freedom	The experience of free will versus external forces on behavior and the burden of responsibility for one's choices in response to a complex array of alternatives
Meaning	The desire to believe life is meaningful versus events and experiences that appear random or inconsistent with one's bases of meaning

Consequently, the question arises, can a school shooting be an expression of the perpetrator's existential concerns?

Traditionally, religion offers answers to existential concerns. Interestingly, school shootings have occurred more frequently in areas with a strong conservative religious population (Arcus 2002). Michael Carneal (Heath High School shooting, 1997, Kentucky) came from a family of devoted members of the Lutheran Church. Mitchell Johnson (Westside Middle School shooting, 1998, Arkansas) sang in the Central Baptist Church youth choir (Newman et al. 2004). Dylan Klebold (Columbine shooting, 1999, Colorado) attended confirmation classes in accordance with Lutheran tradition. However, not all school shooters have a Christian background. Some of them declare themselves atheists like Kip Kinkel (Thurston High School shooting, 1998, Oregon) when he writes, "anyone that believes in God is a f*² sheep" (Langman 2008a). Luke Woodham (Pearl High School shooting, 1997, Mississippi) writes about his hatred for the Christian God for creating humanity. As Kip Kinkel puts it: "If there was a God, he wouldn't let me feel the way I do." Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech school shooting, 2007, Virginia) makes anti-Christian statements in his manifesto: "Only if you could be the victim of your reprehensible and wicked crimes, you Christian Nazis, you would have brute-restrained your animal urges to f*k me" (Langman 2008b). Pekka puts

²Swearing words omitted by present authors.

on his YouTube profile, “I am a cynical existentialist, antihuman humanist, antisocial socialdarwinist, realistic idealist and godlike atheist” (Auvinen 2007).

Although some shooters define themselves in their documents as atheists, and at first glance a school shooting does not appear to be religious violence, we will consider that school shootings do have a religious dimension.

When we want to understand the seemingly religious dimensions of school shootings, we have to make use of a broader definition of religion. The most relevant definition in our search for a possible relation between school shootings and the existential concerns of the perpetrators is that of *implicit religion*, conceptualized by Edward I. Bailey. Bailey (1999) states that people talk about issues that they think are really important to them in terms which are also used by religious people. His research found that people assume that their thoughts addressing these issues are absolutely true. Bailey coins the term *implicit religion* to refer to religiosity in general, rather than to any specific type of religion.

By using the idea of some implicit religion as ‘hidden’ or ‘rejected’ religious belief or practice, it is possible to conceptualize the charting of a change in the boundaries of traditional religion resulting from the adoption of some forms of implicit religion and the rejection of others. (Lord 2006: 217)

Linking a school shooting—a ruthless killing of people—to religion may seem a paradox within the common understanding of religion. However, as Bailey argues, explicit and implicit religion can differ tremendously. The concept of implicit religion is used in this study to interpret the existential concerns expressed by school shooters, to arrive at a supplementary account of the motives of school shooters.

METHOD

Selected School Shooters and Material

Autobiographical documents of school shooters were used to analyse their existential concerns. Given the limited number of cases, we opted for a theoretical selection to maximize heterogeneity. The selection was based on divergent contexts of different educational systems; differing social circumstances of the school shooter; and the reliable material we could find. Documents and videos in English and German were used to avoid losing crucial information in translation. Given the researchers’ linguistic abilities, documents written in German have been translated by the author. Misspelled words were corrected and swearing is indicated with an asterisk (*). Only material created by the school shooters themselves with a direct link to the shooting was used. The

material has been found on Peter Langman's website schoolshooters.info,³ and the website of *Archiv für Menschkunde und Sozialpädagogik Rudolf Steiners*. Original videos of Seung-Hui Cho and Pekka-Eric Auvinen have been found via google on YouTube.

Table 2. Selected school shooters and materials

Name	Incident	Material
Luke Woodham Age 16	Mississippi, USA: 1st October 1997, Pearl High School, Pearl	Several writings: 4 pages
Kipland Kinkel Age 15	Oregon, USA: 21st May 1998, Thurston High School, Springfield	Journal, essay: 5.5 pages
Eric Harris Age 18	Colorado, USA: 20th April 1999, Columbine High School, Columbine	Journal, writings in school planner:
Dylan Klebold Age 17		Harris 2.5 pages; Klebold 3.5 pages
Sebastian Bosse Age 18	Germany, Europe: 20th November 2006, Geschwister Scholl Schule, Emsdetten	Suicide note: 3 pages
Seung-Hui Cho Age 23	Virginia, USA: 16th April 2007, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg	Manifesto, video: 11 pages
Pekka-Eric Auvinen Age 18	Finland, Europe: 7th November 2007, Jokela High School, Tuusula	3 online documents, confession video: 9.5 pages

The Five Existential Concerns in the Texts

The five existential concerns listed above are used as categories for analyzing the texts. The subcategories were developed in an inductive way. For example, the expressions *I want to die* or *I will kill myself* are found in the texts and therefore the subcategory suicide was attached to the category death.

Directed Content Analyses

Starting with existing concepts of existential concerns we used QDA Miner software to analyze the texts. In cases where we could not assign a code to

³Dr. Langman is a psychologist and the author of *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (2010). He is a sought-after expert on the psychology of youths who commit rampage school shootings. All the material on his website appear to be trustworthy.

an expression, we decided whether we needed a new code or could assign a subcategory of an existing code.

Firstly, we used quantitative content analyses to assess frequency and weight (Bortz & Döring 2006). We looked at the relative frequency of the (sub) categories in the texts per case and in all texts taken together. The frequency with which existential concerns occur suggests the significance they had for the school shooter. This led to an assessment of the relative importance of the various concerns for the perpetrators. The following categories were used: Top frequency (TF) when a concern is found in more than 60% of the phrases; high frequency (HF) for occurrences between 41%–60%; medium frequency (MF) 21%–40%; low frequency (LF) 1%–20%.

Secondly, we gathered the expressions of the various existential concerns and made a summary of content. Furthermore, we selected the phrases that appeared most typical as examples in our result paragraph.

RESULTS

The results are presented per existential concern. First, we present the results of the frequency analyses in a short overview. Then, we present a summary of the content of expressions per existential concern and the most typical phrases. The analysis of the autobiographical documents shows clearly that school shooters experience acute existential concerns.

Frequency

A concern with death is found in all documents and always in a top frequency except in Sebastian Bosse's text, where death is found in a low frequency. Suicide and murder are related to death in all cases.

A concern with isolation is present in a text in five cases, and, when mentioned, is always used with top frequency. In all these cases the perpetrators feel lonely, rejected and as if they are treated like outcasts.

As with the concern with death, all perpetrators discuss concerns over identity in their writings. In five cases the concern occurs with a top frequency, once with a high frequency and once in a low frequency. In most cases the shooters feel superior and are frustrated that no one else seems to acknowledge their superiority.

A concern with freedom is discussed in the expressions of four shooters, twice in medium frequency, once in low frequency, and once in high frequency. It takes the form of, for example, a feeling that their personal freedom is in conflict with the demands of society.

Meaning is discussed in five cases, twice in medium frequency, twice in low frequency, and once in a top frequency. One could argue that death,

identity, isolation, and freedom are also related to meaning, and that, therefore, these percentages are inaccurate.

Death

All school shooters in this study struggle with death as existential concern. They talk about suicide, killing people, and, in the case of Pekka, about mortality as a more abstract concept. Often, they seemingly exaggerate the plan to kill others. They obviously have the feeling that they have the right to kill people who are, in their eyes, inferior. Notably, Eric and Pekka call their murder plan ‘natural selection.’ In fact, Pekka even calls his manifesto a *Natural Selector’s Manifesto* (Oksanen 2013). Murder is seen as a way of being more powerful than others and being able to choose who will live and who will die. As Dylan writes: “I’ll go on my killing spree against anyone I want.” Apparently, the school shooting is also seen as a fight between ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ Kip and Luke argue that killing people is a good thing because they free the world from evil. In Kip’s words this is expressed as, “all humans are evil. I just want to end the world of evil,” while Luke states, “I killed because people like me are mistreated every day.” In some expressions, an apocalyptic image is created, as in Sebastian’s statement that, “People will be lying dead on school grounds, the school will be burning and my brain will be blown out!” Another example comes from Seung-Hui, “We will raise hell on earth that the world has never witnessed. Millions of deaths and millions of gallons of blood on the streets will not quench the avenging phoenix that you have caused us to unleash.”

Revenge is prominently present in the documents as motive for the killing. Sebastian writes in his suicide letter: “I do not want to run away any longer! I want to do my bit in the revolution of the outcast! I want REVENGE!” In some cases the shooters present themselves as martyrs. Seung-Hui, for example, writes, “Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people.” He also refers to the Columbine shooters: “Generation after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to f* you thousand folds for what you Apostles of Sin have done to us.”

Although the idea of killing people seems to give the shooters a positive experience of power, Kip writes, after killing his parents: “I have just killed my parents! I don’t know what is happening. I love my mom and dad so much. I just got two felonies on my record. My parents can’t take that! It would destroy them. The embarrassment would be too much for them. They couldn’t live with themselves. I’m so sorry.” In three cases shooters say they feel sorry for the pain they cause to family and friends.

Isolation

The feeling of isolation is expressed as feeling lonely and rejected by others. Shooters argue that they are being treated as outcasts by other students, teachers and society. Luke writes that “no one ever truly loved me. No one ever truly cared about me. . . . And all throughout my life I was ridiculed. Always beaten, always hated.” And Dylan states: “I have no money, no happiness, no friend.”

Interestingly, only Eric and Pekka do not express feelings of isolation, in line with the remarkable other similarities between their writings. Through their feelings of absolute superiority, they isolate themselves but they seem not to be bothered by this or even aware of it.

Isolation is not only an aspect that seems to contribute to the motivation for a school shooting. It is also an important factor in making a school shooting possible. Feeling rejected, the perpetrators withdraw from parents, peers, school life, and social life. Therefore, their plans and violent phantasies remain unnoticed.

Identity

All cases contain expressions about identity. School shooters know, certainly since Columbine, that in a mass media culture a school shooting will have a significant impact on society. Posting manifestos on the internet they seem to seek a mass audience to witness their violent performance. Luke writes: “Wednesday 1, 1997 shall go down in history as the day I fought back.” He is aware of the fact that he will be remembered through his deed.

Seemingly, school shooters create an idea of being a member of an elite club of ‘god-like’ murderers motivated by divine retribution. Bosse describes this ‘club’ in a single phrase when he mentions several school shooters: “It is scary how similar Eric was to me. Sometimes it seems as if I were to live his life again, as if everything would repeat itself. I am not a copy of REB, VoDKa, Steinhäuser, Gill, Kinkel, Weise or anybody else! I am the advancement of REB! I learned from his mistakes, the bombs. I learned from his entire life.”⁴ Eric and Dylan are frequently mentioned in the documents of other shooters. They often function as role models in the search for identity. Pekka sometimes uses exact phrases from the Columbine shooters.

In their documents school shooters underline their feelings of superiority. Some of them call themselves or other shooters god-like or God. Sebastian,

⁴REB: Eric Harris; VoDKa: nickname of Dylan Klebold; Steinhäuser: Robert Steinhäuser (2002 school shooting Erfurt Germany); Gill: Kimveer Singh Gill (2006 school shooting Montreal Canada); Kinkel: Kip Kinkel; Weise: Jeff Weise (2005 Red Lake, Minnesota).

writes in his diary that “Eric Harris ist Gott” and calls himself “god-like.” Dylan says in a video that they will have followers because they are so god-like. To emphasize their superiority they dehumanize and demonize others. Sebastian writes that “Of all lives in this world, my live is supposedly the only one that is meaningful . . . really, when you look at people nowadays, you only see empty bodies, all dressed up and spruced up to the max but that is only the shell. The inside is empty.” They also see themselves as avenging angels. Luke writes “I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I did this to show society ‘push us and we will push back!’”

Freedom

School shooters express a concern that they do not experience personal freedom. They are in conflict with the demands of society, peers, and parents. Eric states that there is no freedom and he hates it when people like parents, teachers or politicians tell him what to do. Moreover, he sees the boundaries of society as restricting everyone’s freedom: “Human nature is smothered out by society, job, and work and school. Instincts are deleted by laws.” And in another phrase he asks, “ever wonder why we go to school? Besides getting a so-called education. It’s not too obvious to most of you stupid fucks but for those who think a little more and deeper you should realize it. Its society’s way of turning all the young people into good little robots and factory workers.” Pekka writes that “the masses will get an education, they study, get a job, go to work and vote in elections. They think they are free and don’t criticise or question the system. They have become robots.” Sebastian says in a video, “You are forced to pay taxes, you are forced to stick to speed limits, you are forced to do this, you are forced to do that. Ergo: No Freedom!”

Shooters seem to equate freedom with having absolute control over their lives. Control over their lives means to them that they do not have to fulfil social obligations. The absence of being in control is felt as absence of freedom. Therefore, they make their own rules and the ultimate control—the ultimate freedom—is being able to decide who will live and who will die.

Consequently, deadly weapons are instruments for gaining freedom. As Sebastian expresses “I am free! No one has the right to interfere in my life, and if someone does so anyway then he has to accept the consequences! No politician has the right to make laws which forbid me to do something, No copper has the right to take my weapon away, especially when he wears his on a belt.”

School shooters are obsessed with weapons. In their mind, they give them power, control and consequently freedom. Kip writes, facing the loss of the weapons he thought he needed so desperately: “I need to find more weapons.

My parents are trying to take away some of my guns! My guns are the only things that haven't stabbed me in the back. "And Eric writes, "I am f*ing armed. I feel more confident, stronger, more God-like."

Meaning

The school shooters in this study are disappointed with the reality of life. Interestingly, the shootings seem to give meaning to their lives. As Eric states, "THIS is what I am motivated for, THIS is my goal. THIS is what I want to do with my life." He specifically says that killing as many people as he can is what he wants to do in life. In a similar vein, Pekka writes: "Life is just a meaningless coincidence . . . result of long process of evolution and many several factors, causes and effects. However, life is also something that an individual wants and determines it to be. And I'm the dictator and god of my own life. And me, I have chosen my way. I am prepared to fight and die for my cause."

As is also clear from Pekka's statement that reality does not meet the shooters' expectations, and they argue that life, as most people live it, is meaningless. Sebastian writes: "I can build a house, get children and who knows what else. What is the point? The house will be demolished one day, and the children will die one day. What is the point of live? There is no point. So you have to bring meaning to your life"

As an example, Eric expresses this in similar words: "You go to school, to get used to studying and learning how your 'supposed to' so that drains or filters out a little bit of human nature. . . . After school you are expected to get a job or go to college. To have more of your human nature blown out your ass."

DISCUSSION

It is clear from the analysis that in these school shooters' writings they explicitly struggle with such existential concerns as their own mortality, isolation and identity. Fanaticism and cruelty are interconnected with existential concerns. They function as a defense mechanism to deal, for example, with the fear of death (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski 2006). Killing others creates an illusion of being invulnerable and immortal (Becker 1973). The fact that school shooters are not able to find answers to these concerns backs them into a corner of extreme desperation and anger. Apparently, they come to the conclusion that they have no options left. Seung-Hui expresses this in his video manifesto: "You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today, but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me *only one option*." Sebastian wrote, "When you realize, that you

will never be happy again in this life and the reasons for that pile up day by day, then you have *no other option* than to disappear from this life.”

Religion traditionally offers answers to such existential concerns. Deeply religious people do not question the definition of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ of their sacred canon, as argued in Divine command theory: God’s request overrides traditional human ethical considerations. In this light, one can suggest that school shooters make their own canon of views and interpretations. This canon is linked to their implicit religion. Indicators of the implicit religion of school shooters are the religious terminology they use in their documents to justify their horrendous acts of violence. They use religious themes in their documents, such as the fight between good and evil; they create apocalyptic scenarios, and act like martyrs. As an avenging angel they kill to take revenge for not only themselves but (in most cases) for all humiliated people. Thus, school shooters use traditional religious phrases to underline the significance of their words. Seung-Hui, who seems to nominate himself as a messiah, declares: “all of you who have been beaten, humiliated, and crucified, Children of Ishmael, Crusaders of Anti-Terrorism, my Jesus Christ Brothers and Sisters, you’re in my heart. In life and death and spirit. We’ll soon be together.” Just as religious movements have an enlightened leader, school shootings seem to have had one since Columbine. In many of the other shooters’ documents, Dylan and Eric are addressed as god-like, God and martyrs. Additionally, the Columbine shooting seems to be the script for other shootings. A phrase in Sebastian’s writings links directly to Columbine: “Imagine you are in your old school, imagine the trench coat covers all your tools for justice, and then you throw the first Molotov cocktail, the first bomb. You are sending your most hated place to hell!”⁵ Not only are many references to the Columbine shooting found in the documents, but shooters also imitate Dylan’s and Eric’s clothing.

School shooters construe themselves as having a god-like self-image. They assign themselves the identity of an avenging angel and of a martyr. When others do not acknowledge their superiority they feel rejected and alone. They cannot deal with these feelings of isolation and loneliness. Perhaps by including others in their suicide they defeat their isolation in one last lethal act.

Other youth have identified themselves with school shooters. Remarkably, school shooters discussing their plans with their online contacts received positive feedback for their plans from others (Kiilakoski & Oksanen 2011). After a school shooting, fan websites pop up. Oksanen et al. (2014) identified 113 school shooting fan profiles and found that school shooting fans share language, cultural codes and a group identity.

⁵Eric and Dylan hid their weapons under their trench coats, which they were wearing during the shooting. Before they started shooting they tried to let bombs explode.

Choosing the time, place and circumstances of their own death, as well as choosing who will live and who will die seems to provide school shooters psychologically with the power and the freedom they so desperately want, expressed in their documents. They know that their deed will receive significant media coverage and make them immortal, at least for the families and friends of their victims. One can, of course, argue (correctly) that mental disorders, antisocial personality disorders and/or severe bullying can lead to school shootings, but that may not be the whole picture. Our study suggests that the school shootings may be understood as trans-ethical violent actions driven by existential concerns and framed in the language of implicit religion. This understanding may prove to be an essential building block in interpreting—and possibly preventing—school shootings.

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