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## What Has Columbine to Do With Jerusalem?

### Anthropological and Sociological Insights from Manifest Tragedy Applied to the Hidden Violence of Bullying in Our Schools

#### Abstract

*In the aftermath of school shootings, there is little hesitancy about including religious communities in the work of counseling, memorializing, sharing assembly space, etc. The author argues that this instinct reveals anthropological and sociological insights that could help the religious community to find a public voice in response not only to “manifest violence” but also to “hidden violence,” the paradigmatic case of which is bullying in the schools. The author challenges religious leaders to be more involved in anti-bullying efforts and makes suggestions for action as part of a whole-community response to the violence.*

The world was horrified last December when twenty-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 28 people, targeting Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where most of his victims were defenseless six- and seven-year-olds.<sup>1</sup> It was, perhaps, the most shocking school shooting in the popular mind since the tragedy at Columbine High School in April, 1999, an event that many of us watched unfold on live television and that has branded the name “Columbine” as synonymous with school shootings.<sup>2</sup> These are episodes of manifest violence.<sup>3</sup> They capture the public’s attention and create media frenzies. They bring together whole communities for everything from caring for victims to engaging in political efforts to address perceived underlying problems. In these situations, the religious community is quite visible. I contend that violence, though, is a *daily* event in our schools and that the hidden, silent nature of much of it makes it that much more tragic. Bullying is the paradigmatic case here, and we would do well to take it seriously as a terribly destructive form of violence that demands our involvement as religious professionals not only *in media res* and in the aftermath but especially in prevention and detection. Our commitment to promoting peace, social justice, and human rights demands nothing less than a public response.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Honan, “Eight months after massacre, Newtown begins new school year,” *Reuters*, August 27, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/27/us-usa-shooting-newtown-idUSBRE97Q0GT20130827> [accessed August 27, 2013]. By emphasizing the shocking fact that twenty 6- and 7-year-olds were killed, I do not mean to diminish in any way the tragedy of six adult deaths at Sandy Hook as well, not including Adam and his mother.

<sup>2</sup>Dave Cullen, *Columbine*. (New York: TWELVE, 2009), 250, 272. Cullen notes that Columbine students do not like the association—for them, “Columbine” is their high school, not a tragedy.

<sup>3</sup>I make the distinction between manifest and hidden violence/tragedy to avoid presenting sensational acts of violence like school shootings as somehow more tragic than quotidian acts of violence such as bullying that are often normalized and thus even more painful because of the lack of acknowledgement that real harm is being done. In both cases, we are dealing with genuine human tragedy, the loss and/or painful diminishment of human life.

<sup>4</sup>The involvement of the faith community in manifest tragedies is important; however, as a matter of social justice, the daily forms of hidden violence demand our attention as well. Critics have maintained that the focus on school shootings is disproportionate and that it distracts attention and resources away from the more common forms of violence that are less sensational, and that, unlike school shootings, tend to affect minority and inner-city

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### Columbine: Lessons in Anthropology and Sociology

The tragedy at Columbine High School reveals two fundamental points: first, we are spiritual beings who seek transcendence, search for meaning, and need community;<sup>5</sup> second, our schools (state, private, and religious)<sup>6</sup> exist as part of a larger public that includes faith communities, and following the bureaucratic tendency towards specialization to such a degree that schools become islands without extensive contact with the larger community is both destructive and disingenuous.<sup>7</sup> In response to manifest tragedy in a school, the wall between Church and State diminishes<sup>8</sup> and cooperation abounds with negligible criticism. In 2009, after ten years of meticulous research, Dave Cullen published a definitive report on the Columbine massacre, providing an account sufficiently dense and with enough historical distance to allow for careful analysis.<sup>9</sup> At Columbine High School, we witnessed religious organizations partnering with the school in sharing space and, quite literally, holding the community together; in providing counseling services; in holding prayer services for finding comfort, hope, meaning, and some degree of healing; and in memorializing, including burying the dead. In addition, it was not uncommon to see students at Columbine gathering together for prayer on their own initiative, or to hear that they prayed in the midst of the chaos.<sup>10</sup> Survey data from 2007 indicate that this is not likely an isolated case, with only 14 percent of American respondents aged 13 to

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communities more than suburban, predominantly white communities [see, for example, Katherine Newman et al, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 48ff]. I hope that by turning our attention to bullying as representative of a larger genre of daily school violence we will firmly stake our ground as faith communities against all forms of violence, whether manifest or hidden, and avoid inadvertently becoming part of the problem of normalizing any form of violence at all.

<sup>5</sup>By “transcendence” here, I employ Robert J. Starratt’s second sense of the term, namely, “becoming a part of something larger than one’s own life.” Robert J. Starratt, *Cultivating an Ethical School*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 30-1.

<sup>6</sup>I use the term “state/government schools” to indicate what we normally call “public schools” in the U.S. in order to break open the term “public” to include *all* schools, indicating that schools, by their nature, are a public good and ought to operate as part of the community and not as islands apart from civil society. I am aware that the term “state schools” has the disadvantage to the American ear of conjuring up “state universities,” but it has the distinct advantage of resonating with the popular American legal phrase, “separation of church and state.” In any case, *all schools* are “public” in the sense I am using the term here. For this usage and for the idea that the school cannot educate well, including educating for non-violence, apart from the larger community, I am drawing from Parker Palmer. See Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of American Public Life*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), especially 43ff, 111.

<sup>7</sup>The reverse is true as well. Churches, for example, can operate in H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ against culture” mode, but my call in this paper is for religious organizations as such to break down walls and engage in public debate and action for the common good, in this case in the efforts against school bullying.

<sup>8</sup>Most cases of manifest violence do occur in government schools and so questions about the wall of separation are appropriate; however, when violence occurs in non-government schools, the issue is more about community cooperation than legal questions concerning the First Amendment.

<sup>9</sup>Historical perspective is important, as Cullen notes, because the initial reporting on tragic events is often flawed due to lack of information and perspective. Cullen writes, “...in the great media blunders during the initial coverage of this story, where nearly everyone got the central factors wrong, I was among the guilty parties. I hope this book contributes to setting the story right.” Cullen, *Columbine*, x. His extensive research is documented (and updated) on his websites, [www.davecullen.com](http://www.davecullen.com) and [www.columbine-online.com](http://www.columbine-online.com).

<sup>10</sup>Cullen, *Columbine*, 116-7, 227. Student Craig Scott, who survived the massacre but whose sister, Rachel, was killed, said “The number one thing that helped me get through was my faith in God.” (Craig Scott, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Harpo Productions, Inc., ABC, unspecified date, 2002. Available on YouTube, 03:42, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTEZ4iiWJWU> at time. [accessed September 10, 2013].)

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24 reporting that religion or spirituality plays no role in their lives.<sup>11</sup> None of this amounts to a violation of the Establishment Clause, nor does it represent an “excessive entanglement”<sup>12</sup> between government schools and religious organizations.<sup>13</sup> Instead, it reminds us of who we are as human persons and it challenges us to be more holistic and communal in our everyday approach to education. The insights gained in episodes of manifest violence should inform our approach to hidden violence as well, of which bullying is the classic case.

#### The Violent Act of Bullying: Matt’s Story<sup>14</sup>

When I first met Matt in 1998, he was a high school freshman on a leadership training seminar that I helped facilitate in Danbury, Connecticut. Alone in the conference room one evening, Matt shared a poem he had written. The connection between bullying, spirituality (in this case, *imitatio Christi*) and violence—both hidden and potentially manifest—could not be more poignant. It is worth reprinting here in full:

#### “Rage”

From the start you try to be their friend,  
But it is no use they won’t accept you.  
They taunt and tease and push you around  
But you don’t fight back because it’s not what  
HE would have done.  
The Rage is great  
But you hide it to keep your appearance  
So when they look at you they see HIM  
Then one day the rage is so great  
You discover a way to end it all  
And destroy yourself to rid the world of  
this problem.  
But you use your head and find that you are not the  
problem, they are.  
But is that what HE would have done?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Eric Gorski and Trevor Tompson, “AP Poll: God vital to young Americans,” *USA Today*, August 24, 2007, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-08-24-3867343255\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-08-24-3867343255_x.htm) [accessed September 10, 2013].

<sup>12</sup>This is the language used in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971) as part of the Supreme Court’s famous “Lemon test” for determining whether the Establishment Clause has been violated.

<sup>13</sup>This is not to say that there were not abuses. Immediately after the Columbine massacre, students were proselytized by some Christian Evangelical congregations which saw the tragedy as the work of the devil and a consequence of students' not having given their lives over to Jesus Christ (Cullen, *Columbine*, 120ff, 177ff). A man from out of state set up memorial crosses in an act of exploitation that he repeats throughout the country in times of tragedy (Cullen, *Columbine*, 194). Despite these unsettling situations when the wall is lowered, they do not seem to amount to a First Amendment breach since the agents were not school officials nor had the schools cooperated in the efforts. In fact, the overwhelming evidence from Columbine suggests that Church and State can cooperate without a violation of the First Amendment. Of course, if the line is crossed, the usual recourse to the courts remains open. That was the case when Columbine High School refused to allow religious language on memorial tiles in the re-opened school. See *Fleming v. Jefferson County Sch. Dist. R-1*, 298 F.3d 918, 934 (10th Cir. 2002), quoted in Robert D. Richards and Clay Calvert, “Columbine Fallout: The Long-term Effects on Free Expression Take Hold In Public Schools,” 83 B.U.L. Rev. 1089 (2003), 1090 n. 3.

<sup>14</sup>Matt’s story is re-told here with his permission. The narrative is constructed from conversations both in person and by telephone/email during the spring and summer of 2013, as well as from recollections of our initial conversation in 1998. I am grateful to Matt for his courage and trust in allowing me to share his story and poetry here.

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Matt's ordeal began in sixth grade after having transferred to a new Catholic middle school. Although he had friends in the school and was never an outcast, Matt was singled out for bullying by three boys. He turned to the assistant principal for help, but the problem did not cease. Even after graduation the problem continued. One of the boys, Sydney,<sup>16</sup> the worst of the three, followed Matt to high school. When Matt joined the swim team, the skimpy bathing suits and the shaving of body hair became new ammunition for Sydney, who was intent on embarrassing Matt in front of his classmates at every opportunity. He assaulted him with homophobic insults—though Matt is straight—calling him “gay,” which is one of the harshest and most embarrassing epithets in the high school lexicon (thus indirectly bullying any gay students within range as well<sup>17</sup>). Reflecting back on it, Matt wishes someone had told him, “This will pass. Maybe it will go on for a while, even through high school, but it will not go on forever. Things will get better.” Instead, he felt misery that seemed unending, and he lived in the daily emotional trauma of not knowing when the next attack would take place. Even being away from school was no guarantee of relief. In middle school, for example, Matt was harassed at friends' birthday parties and once, in an excruciatingly cruel episode, he was bullied even at his own sleepover birthday party. The fact that his bullies were boys whom he originally had hoped to befriend intensified the pain, putting the salt of rejection in the wound of bullying.<sup>18</sup> Understandably, Matt's self-esteem plummeted and would take years to recover. As a result, he also had trouble with relationships. At his lowest point, Matt became suicidal and cut himself on a couple of occasions. As his poem witnesses, the suicidal thoughts turned to rage and revenge. He felt an inner conflict between his spiritual-moral life and this desire to end the torment “by any means necessary.” He even asked another student, who also had problems with Sydney, whether he wanted to “do something about it.” The other boy declined, and in the end, Matt never developed a plan of retaliation—a testament to his deeply held moral values. Pascal once said, “*comprendre, c'est pardonner*,” and Matt, now 30 and engaged to be married, has demonstrated the truth of this insight, preemptively pardoning two of the men who bullied him in light of what he has since come to understand about their own lives and upbringing. Sydney, however, acted inexplicably. Matt says he was just “a very mean human being.” When Sydney became paralyzed in a diving accident after high school, Matt says “it was hard to feel any sympathy,” though, as a man of deep compassion, he did not rejoice over it either. Significantly, Matt imagines that if Sydney were ever to apologize to him for those years of torment, he would forgive him. Although he has lost his faith, Matt continues to imitate Christ as he did in high school, enduring the cross and forgiving just as HE once did.

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<sup>15</sup>Matt B., unpublished poem, “Rage,” ca. 1998, edited slightly for punctuation. The original is in my files.

<sup>16</sup>This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the person involved, whom I have never met.

<sup>17</sup>These indirect assaults are known as “microaggressions,” and are defined as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group... Perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the recipient of the communication.” Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 5, 191ff. See also Klein in footnote 39.

<sup>18</sup>Newman discusses the particularly rough situation of being in a “liminal position” that may correspond to what Matt endured. This social position describes not the outcasts of a school but rather those who have a real possibility of being part of the “in” crowd but who suffer repeated rejection. See Newman et al, *Rampage*, 131.

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### Bullying Defined: Repeated Violence Against the Less Powerful

As we see in Matt's story, bullying is violence that strikes at the very center of one's being, sometimes leading to suicidal ideation. In the most tragic and rare cases, suicide and/or homicide does result, as it did recently in Lakeland, Florida when 12-year-old Rebecca Ann Sedwick jumped to her death after being cyber-bullied by over a dozen girls<sup>19</sup>; or in Greenwich, Connecticut where Bartłomiej "Bart" Palosz, 15, fatally shot himself on the first day of school after years of bullying.<sup>20</sup> Most often, however, students who are bullied suffer in silence. They carry the scars and the psychological complications well beyond high school.<sup>21</sup> Adults sometimes treat bullying as a normal part of growing up, perhaps even seeing it as a positive event that toughens kids up for a harsh world. Late in 2010, after a year in which the hidden violence of bullying erupted as manifest tragedy following the successive suicides of Phoebe Prince (age 15, hanging), Billy Lucas (age 15, hanging), Seth Walsh (age 13, hanging), Asher Brown (age 13, gunshot), and Tyler Clementi (age 18, jumped from the George Washington Bridge),<sup>22</sup> President Barack Obama rightly directed the nation saying, "We've got to dispel this myth that bullying is just a normal rite of passage."<sup>23</sup> While learning to handle the occasional conflict surely is a healthy part of growing up, dealing with bullying is emphatically not. Bullying, by definition, is not just occasional teasing or inter-personal conflict. In a widely accepted definition from *The Journal of the American Medical Association*,

Bullying is a specific type of aggression in which (1) the behavior is intended to harm or disturb, (2) the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and (3) there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one. This asymmetry of power may be physical or psychological, and the aggressive behavior may be verbal (e.g. name-calling, threats), physical (e.g. hitting), or psychological (e.g. rumors, shunning/exclusion).<sup>24</sup>

This formulation finds resonance with the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) definition: "Bullying is the repeated actions or threats of action directed toward a person by one or more people who have or are perceived to have more power or status than their target in order to cause

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<sup>19</sup>Associated Press, "Bullied 12-Year-Old Florida Girl Commits Suicide," *Time*, September 12, 2013, <http://nation.time.com/2013/09/12/bullied-12-year-old-florida-girl-commits-suicide/> [accessed September 17, 2013].

<sup>20</sup>Steven Yablonski and Matt Campbell, "Greenwich HS student commits suicide on first day of school," *WFSB: Eyewitness News 3*, August 28, 2013, <http://www.wfsb.com/story/23278527/greenwich-hs-student-commits-suicide-on-first-day-of-school> [accessed August 29, 2013]. For his sister's description of the bullying Bart endured, see Brittany Lyte, "Sister talks about Palosz, bullying," *ctpost.com*, August 30, 2013, <http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Sister-talks-about-Palosz-bullying-4773591.php> [accessed September 11, 2013].

<sup>21</sup>Paul R. Smokowski and Kelly Holland Kopasz, "Bullying in School: An Overview of types, Effects, Family Characteristics, and Intervention Strategies," *Children & Schools* 27, no. 2 [April 2005]: 105.

<sup>22</sup>Clementi's death followed upon an incident of privacy invasion by his Rutgers University roommates regarding sexual activity with another man. While this incident does not meet the strict definition of bullying—specifically the lack of repetition over time—the tragedy was highly publicized and, in the public mind, combined with the other suicides to bring national attention to the issue of bullying in 2010. For example, Bishop Arthur Serratelli of Patterson, New Jersey wrote that Clementi's suicide was the result of "a clear case of cyber bullying" (Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli, "Death at Rutgers: In the Wake of Tragedy, a Way Forward," *Catholic Star Herald*, October 22, 2010, <http://catholicstarherald.org/index.php?view=article&catid=102:latest> [accessed December 10, 2010]).

<sup>23</sup>President Barack Obama, "President Obama: It Gets Better," October 21, 2010, The White House Blog, 00:16, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/10/21/president-obama-it-gets-better> [accessed September 18, 2013].

<sup>24</sup>Tonja R. Nansel, PhD, et al., "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth: Prevalence and Association with Psychosocial Adjustment," *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, no. 16 [April 2001]: 2094.

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fear, distress or harm.”<sup>25</sup> The National Education Association (NEA) has spoken out forcefully, saying, “bullying... needs to be addressed as a matter of social justice; it is an affront to democracy and to our democratic institutions. Bullying deprives children of their rightful entitlement to go to school in a safe, just and caring environment...”<sup>26</sup> In her work, *Bullying in American Schools*, Anne Garrett quotes the National School Safety Center in California which “reports that bullying is the most enduring and underrated problem in American schools.”<sup>27</sup> In the face of such a pervasive problem relating to social justice and human thriving, it is surprising that what Ronald Hecker Cram wrote in 2003 appears still to be true: “More often than not, the church politely ignores the depth of the violence of bullying...”<sup>28</sup> I would extend that critique to other religious organizations as well, with one very public exception, the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, whose work in this area is exemplary.<sup>29</sup>

“Something There is That Doesn’t Love a Wall”<sup>30</sup>

The metaphor of a wall that separates Church and State has been with us since at least Roger Williams and more famously, Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists. The image does not serve us well in the field of education, though, for two reasons. First, the wall tends to become a medieval enceinte not only protecting against encroachment by the state on religious turf, and vice versa, but also establishing the school as a place apart, an outpost with only formal ties to the community.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the wall represents not merely a separation of Church and State, but, contrary to John Dewey’s classic vision, a separation between school and society. Second, the image of the wall belies the reality that the person cannot be divided: it is not possible to build a wall that separates the citizen or the student from the soul. In order for our education systems to be effective in nurturing the whole person and building up our democratic society, we must recognize the truth that is unveiled for us during manifest tragedies such as at

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<sup>25</sup>Anti-Defamation League, under “BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING DEFINED,” <http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/bullying-cyberbullying/> [accessed September 17, 2013].

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Anne G. Garrett, *Bullying in American Schools: Causes, Preventions, Interventions*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 59.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Garrett, *Bullying in American Schools*, 64.

<sup>28</sup>Ronald Hecker Cram, *Bullying: A Spiritual Crisis*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2003), 48.

<sup>29</sup>The ADL does not style itself a religious organization and may be better designated as quasi-religious. Its efforts include, but extend beyond, its historic mission of defending against anti-Semitism. For its exemplary work against bullying, see, for example, the resources available on their website: <http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/bullying-cyberbullying/>. Other religious organizations may be doing work as well, and I would be grateful to learn of the various efforts; still, the fact that the ADL’s activism has included a very public effort, including advocating for legislative change, and sponsoring highway billboards and the documentary film “Bully,” makes their work exceptional in my mind. For their own perception of the work they are doing, see the press release, “ADL Takes Lead in Nationwide Effort to Raise Awareness About School Bullying” at <http://www.adl.org/press-center/press-releases/education/adl-takes-lead-in-nationwide.html#Uji7Oj9LiFA>. This work is not without suspicion from the far right. One reason that anti-bullying efforts do not always make progress is that conservative critics see them as a façade for imposing a liberal moral agenda that includes such things, in their mind, as normalizing homosexuality. For a taste of this criticism in response to the ADL, see <http://rense.com/general86/evan.htm>.

<sup>30</sup>Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” The Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing @ the University of Pennsylvania, <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/frost-mending.html> [accessed September 5, 2013].

<sup>31</sup>By “formal ties” I mean such things as funding and political oversight. In the material work of education, though, the links to the larger community are less obvious and schools often operate as silos. Even in cases where the school is the center of the community’s social/civic life, the actual operation of the school may still be done in relative isolation. The many public events that take place in the school building (sports, community meetings, drama events, voting, etc.) hide the fact that the material work of the school *qua* school is largely handled without much coordination with the larger community in many cases.

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Columbine: the wall, as I have described it, is a sham. This is a point Jürgen Habermas makes philosophically: “When secularized citizens act in their role as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates.”<sup>32</sup> The pluralism of world views, he indicates, should not lead to walls of separation but rather to channels of communication for the public purpose of learning from one another for the sake of the common good. Once we come to that conclusion, religious professionals will more readily join the public work of addressing hidden forms of violence, such as bullying.

### “The Loving World Was There All the Time”

Being involved to prevent and detect bullying, and to intervene, counsel, and promote healing when bullying is occurring or has occurred requires more than just a youth group event or a sermon on the topic. It must be a sustained and multipronged effort so that students have no doubt that, as Columbine survivor Patrick Ireland put it, “the loving world was there all the time.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, it will be a public effort, which means that *ad intra* programming and educational efforts will be combined with *ad extra* coordination and advocacy so that the religious voice is heard as part of a whole community approach to ending violence in our schools, an approach that is increasingly promoted.<sup>34</sup> Here are seven suggestions for such involvement:

- 1) Preach and teach. Bullying is too easily normalized. Adults and children alike need to hear the message from religious leaders that bullying is wrong and that we must stand up for one another, especially the most vulnerable. Following Cram’s advice, teaching empathy is the *sine qua non*.<sup>35</sup> Beyond our own walls, though, we must “go public” through exposure in local media, social networks, public forums, etc. There is an “aura of ultimacy”<sup>36</sup> around religious teachings that could add more weight to the anti-bullying cause. As Habermas puts it, “Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life.”<sup>37</sup> To not employ this power would be a serious dereliction of duty.
- 2) Model. Since so much bullying is related to homophobia either through targeting of those who are gay<sup>38</sup> or perceived to be gay, or through the use of homophobic insults as we saw in Matt’s

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<sup>32</sup>Jürgen Habermas, “Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State,” in *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 51.

<sup>33</sup>Patrick Ireland was known to many as “the boy in the window” from the live coverage of his escape through the high school’s second-floor library window into the arms of SWAT team officials after having been shot in the head twice. The words are from his valedictory address at Columbine High School the year after the massacre: “The shooting made the country aware of the unexpected level of hate and rage that had been hidden in high schools... When I fell out the window, I knew somebody would catch me... That’s what I need to tell you: that I knew the loving world was there all the time.” Quoted in Cullen, *Columbine*, 302.

<sup>34</sup>Joy D. Patton, “Community Organizations’ Involvement in School Safety Planning: Does It Make a Difference in School Violence?” *School Social Work Journal* 35, no. 2, [March 2011]: 18. See also comments by Abraham H. Foxman, ADL National Director, in “ADL Takes Lead in Nationwide Effort to Raise Awareness About School Bullying,” <http://www.adl.org/press-center/press-releases/education/adl-takes-lead-in-nationwide.html> #Uji7Oj9LiFA [accessed September 17, 2013].

<sup>35</sup>Cram, *Bullying*, 61ff.

<sup>36</sup>Clifford Geertz, quoted in Thomas H. Groome, *Language for a ‘catholic’ Church*, (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed & Ward, 1991), 35.

<sup>37</sup>Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1, [2006]: 10.

<sup>38</sup>I use the term “gay” expansively to include all those who define themselves in terms other than heterosexual.

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case,<sup>39</sup> the religious community should be especially attentive to this reality. Many people believe that religious groups are culpable in promoting gay bashing.<sup>40</sup> If homophobic bullying seems to have implicit religious backing, then we have no hope of being partners towards its elimination. Because of the severity of the problem and the fact of public perception, religious leaders should redouble efforts to model a non-bullying posture. This is particularly important for religious groups, like my own Roman Catholic Church, that take moral stances that could easily be misinterpreted as homophobic, such as opposing gay marriage and gay adoption.

3) Communicate. Since we are working with the same students, religious educators should communicate with schools to the degree that confidentiality and good judgment allow. Katherine Newman makes a strong case for the danger of fragmented knowledge: evidence of a student who is in need of help may never be assembled in one place to create a full picture of the extent of the problem.<sup>41</sup> We must open channels of communication towards the goal of identifying and helping those who are hurting (in both senses: the agent and the victim of harm).

4) Counsel. Schools should be aware of religious counseling services. It is no breach of the First Amendment for a guidance counselor to be knowledgeable about the variety of services offered in the community and to make them known to students as appropriate. Also, in our litigious and policy-minded age, bullying can easily be seen only in terms of “mandatory reporting.” While this is necessary to protect youths, it is not sufficient. Reporting of a “case” must be coupled with care for the persons involved, both the bullied and the bully. Emmanuel Levinas’ sense of ethical responsibility applies here. It is not supererogatory to go beyond mere reporting: it is a moral imperative.

5) Advocate. Cram makes a solid argument for recognizing bullying as a spiritual crisis, a cry for meaningful relationship by bullies that is ultimately frustrated by the violence they perpetrate.<sup>42</sup> Religious leaders must continue to advocate for holistic and communal education systems that tend to the spiritual, moral, and social reality of students’ lives. Religious groups should be actively involved at every level of government and society to promote laws, policies, and programs that protect our young people.

6) Organize. Anti-bullying efforts will best be sustained by creating structures that help us to “keep our eye on the ball.” Community-wide standing committees for addressing bullying in our schools should be established that bring together dedicated stake-holders including students, parents, educators, religious leaders, political leaders, and others to plan, execute, and regularly evaluate the important public work of resisting violence in the lives of our youth.

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<sup>39</sup>This was also true for Walsh, Brown, Lucas, and Clementi. “A Harris poll in 2005 found that 90 percent of teens who self-identified as gay said they had been bullied in the past year.” (Quoted in *America*, “Bullying, A Deadly Sin,” November 8, 2010, 5). See also James O’Higgins-Norman et al., “Pedagogy for diversity: mediating between tradition and equality in schools,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 14, no. 4, [November 2009]: 324. See also Jessie Klein, “Sexuality and School Shootings: What Role Does Teasing Play in School Massacres?” *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 4, [2006]: 42ff.

<sup>40</sup>“Nearly three-quarters of Americans (72 percent) say religious messages about homosexuality contribute to ‘negative views’ of gays and lesbians...” (Nicole Neroulias, “Americans Say Religious Messages Fuel Negative Views of Gays,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 21, 2010, <http://ncronline.org/print/20890> [accessed December 12, 2010].)

<sup>41</sup>Newman et al., *Rampage*, 90ff. While she is looking at school shooters in particular, the same argument can be made for bullying.

<sup>42</sup>Cram, *Bullying*, 48, 57.

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7) Pray, and invite others to join us in public prayer. Rather than wait for manifest tragedies to bring the community together in prayer, as religious leaders we must “Dig the hole deeper”<sup>43</sup> and root our efforts in the divine power that sustains, purifies, and makes fruitful all our good work.

### Conclusion

As partners in a public response to the violence of bullying, religious leaders can play an effective and unique role in society, breaking down walls in the community and refusing to make manifest tragedy the only occasion for recognizing the spiritual nature of the human person. If Cram is correct that bullying represents a spiritual crisis and a longing for greater connectedness, then the very fact that we take this action as religious people is already a concrete step towards eliminating the preconditions of bullying in our schools.

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<sup>43</sup>Stanley Kunitz, “My Mother’s Pears,” *The New Yorker*, May 17, 1993, 78.

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