

**To Have and To Hold: Theological Perspectives on Personal Gun Ownership
in the United States**

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I hereby certify that this dissertation, which is approximately 16,371 words in length, has been composed by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a degree. This project was conducted by me at the University of St Andrews and at Greenwich, Connecticut, USA, from September 2016 to March 2017 towards fulfillment of the requirements of the University of St Andrews for the degree of Master of Letters under the supervision of Dr. Eric Stoddart.

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Introduction

In April 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama reflected briefly on some of the economic insecurity he had encountered on the campaign trail, while speaking at a San Francisco fund-raiser for his first Presidential campaign. Senator Obama noted that:

You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them...And it's not surprising they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.¹

It was generally considered an uncharacteristic gaffe, and one that his then opponent, Senator Hillary Clinton, tried to turn to her advantage. Mr. Obama quickly apologized. By way of explanation, he told the *Winston-Salem Journal*: "People feel like Washington's not listening to them, and as a consequence, they find that they can only rely on the traditions and the things that have been important to them for generation after generation. Faith. Family. Traditions like hunting. And they get frustrated."²

Unrelatedly, two months later, the U.S. Supreme Court found in *District of Columbia vs. Heller* that the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteed a *personal* right to "keep and bear arms," particularly for the purposes self-defense

¹ Ben Smith, "Obama on Small Town PA: Clinging to Guns, Religion, Xenophobia," "Ben Smith Blog" 11.4.2008, Politico.com. <http://www.politico.com/blogs/ben-smith/2008/04/obama-on-small-town-pa-clinging-to-religion-guns-xenophobia-007737>; accessed 18 September 2016.

² "Obama: 'They Cling to Guns or Religion,'" in "Gleanings," 13.4.2008, *Christianity Today* on-line. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2008/april/obama-they-cling-to-guns-or-religion.html>. Accessed 18 September 2016.

and, especially, the defense of a home.³ This was a seeming clarification of what had previously been legally murky territory for many years—however, as a result, many local, state and federal regulations around guns were newly open to challenge by advocates of broadly-held gun rights, and particularly by the National Rifle Association. Indeed, some regulations were challenged with an eye toward *Heller*.

More deeply, the decision was hailed by many as an affirmation of deeper social and cultural principles—not that it has ever been entirely easy for Americans to name what those principles are. For example, broad notions of freedom and self-reliance were widely cited, but those looking to understand what those terms meant in any depth, based on gun rights, would have had a hard time doing so. Beyond noting the implicit tautology that, for some, guns mean freedom and freedom means guns, it has been hard to say much.

Surprisingly, while guns have received a great deal of analysis in recent sociological, legal, and criminological literature, relatively little theological consideration has been attempted, either in favor of or in opposition to gun ownership. Such critical work as has been done has tended to emphasize the place of guns in American culture as a form of idolatry.⁴ Along these lines, Rabbi Michael Bernstein has written:

...while the Second Amendment provides an important expression of the right to self defense, it is the Second Commandment, forbidding the worship of any object, that reminds me that such a right must be exercised in a way that

³ Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss, *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

⁴ See for example, James Atwood, *America and its Guns: A Theological Expose*. (Cascade, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

elevates, not denigrates the dignity and well-being of those created in G*d's image over all else.⁵

Similarly, Rev. Matt Crebbin, a pastor in Newtown, Connecticut (site of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting), has emphasized, "In America, we don't have a Second Amendment problem. We have a Second Commandment problem."⁶

Unfortunately, having named that problem, theological explorations of guns in American life tend to leave the matter there. One consequence is an impoverished conversation between those of all perspectives, based around the particular binary of guns-are-idolatrous versus no-they-are-not, as if is the one and only theological issue. In point of fact, as divisive as the gun debate is within American society, to study it in any depth repeatedly shows that it is rarely if ever a simple issue, for a which a clear yes or no is sufficient.

More must be said. In fact, this dissertation will suggest that Senator Obama was correct to identify a deep connection between guns and religion, and will argue that this connection requires more careful consideration. More specifically, it will attempt to put American personal gun ownership in theological perspective, by considering both specific theological justifications of the practice, such as there are, and broader theological responses to some important justifications of owning and carrying a gun. In particular, the argument will focus on three areas: guns as a response to anxiety over vulnerability (chapter one), perception of guns as an

⁵ Rabbi Michael Bernstein, "The Second Amendment and the Second Commandment: Being Responsible for Those Created in the Divine Image," *Huffington Post*, 27 December 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-michael-bernstein/second-amendment-and-the-second-commandment_b_2353252.html. Accessed 26 September 2016.

⁶ United Church of Christ, "Introducing a Curriculum on Preventing Gun Violence" (2014), www.ucc.org/videos/gun-violence.html. Accessed 24 September 2016.

inherently neutral technology or “just a tool” (chapter two), and guns as an aspect of personal identity (chapter three). Each chapter will seek to reflect contextually and critically, drawing on both pro-gun literature and theological reflection from the margins, and especially that of Womanist theologians, who have attempted to analyze the impact of dominant cultural narratives and theological justifications of power and privilege in ways that bear directly on the role of guns in the lives of American Christians. It will soon be clear that reflection on guns quickly points to broader questions and debates about violence and non-violence, the role of technology, and the nature of civil religion in American life. Yet if we cannot answer the question of how gun ownership operates theologically, we also cannot answer the question of how guns reflect and shape the worldviews of gun owners. More importantly, unless we do that, we cannot answer the deeper and more urgent question of how to disrupt the perpetual cycles of violence that are such a tragic and familiar feature of American life.

Chapter One: Vulnerability

Introduction

In August 2015, the Rocky Mount United Methodist Church in Jemison, Alabama made national headlines after a local news report described the recently opened gun range on church grounds. According to the pastor, Rev. Phil Guin: “We have had this large hole in the back of our property at the church for quite some time, and we thought it would be neat to start a gun range.” He added that several female church members mentioned they owned or carried firearms but did not know how to properly use them. With that in mind, the range was “designed to be an inexpensive and safe refuge for those interested in practicing their skills or learning how to safely operate a firearm.” As the pastor explained, “...the whole purpose of this range is to provide recreational and gun safety in a warm, loving, Christian environment”⁷

There is much one might seek to clarify about such a project. However, it deserves note that, as far as this pastor and this particular gun range were concerned, there was no apparent social, much less theological controversy surrounding the church’s decision. Perhaps reflecting the place of gun ownership within the community, building the range was not a matter of high principle or tragic necessity, but simply a “neat” way to reclaim unused space. What seems to make it “Christian,” according to the pastor, is the “warm, loving...environment” it offers. Less explicitly, perhaps there is also a kind of Christian duty in its mission,

⁷ Emily Reed, “God and Guns: Jemison Church Provides Unique Ministry,” Clanton (AL) Advertiser, 7 August 2015.
<http://www.clantonadvertiser.com/2015/08/07/god-and-guns-jemison-church-provides-unique-ministry/>

which is described as teaching gun *safety*, especially for elderly women. The questions nobody seems to be asking are whether guns are appropriate for Christians in the first place, or even how gun ownership might be understood ethically and theologically as something Christians can or should do. By contrast, the issue for Rocky Mount UMC is simply one of how to own or learn to use them in a “Christian” way.

This chapter will offer a different perspective. It will argue that gun ownership represents one possible answer to a broader and fundamentally theological question: *what is it to be vulnerable?* For many gun owners, vulnerability is a problem to be addressed, or even a crisis demanding urgent resolution. However, in theological terms, vulnerability is a more nuanced concept, and as such, there is much reason to question if gun ownership offers any meaningful way of addressing its challenges. Moreover, it will be clear that the relationship between a common ontological vulnerability shared by all people can become enmeshed all too easily in distinctive forms of social vulnerability within and between different communities. It is within this enmeshed space that theological claims about and responses to vulnerability are themselves especially at risk of being deployed on behalf of not only secular power, but what Walter Wink has described as “the Powers,” by which he means “...the simultaneity of an outer, visible structure and an inner, spiritual reality.”⁸ Finally, it will also consider how gun ownership engages broader Christian conversations on violence and non-violence, and how gun owners might seek to understand their firearms in light of those conversations.

⁸ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 3.

Inheriting Grand Narratives

If the community of Rocky Mount UMC in Jemison, Alabama understands constructing a gun range on its campus as an expression of what it is to live out the Gospel -- a choice that Christian communities in other contexts would find puzzling at best -- surely part of its decision reflects how the claims of the Gospel and the embodied practices and traditions that flow from those claims are read through the lens of other traditions and what sociologist James Welch has called “grand narratives.” That guns have been at the heart of dominant and dominating communities in the US since colonial times is indisputable. Beginning early in Colonial and Early Federal history, Americans came to associate guns with broader aspirations toward freedom, self-sufficiency, self-determination, etc. Moreover, from its earliest days, European-American culture has had an ambiguous relationship with violence, generally. For example, in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), literary critic Richard Chase argues that the essential “American” story is a version the hero’s journey, told as romance, in which a boy leaves the structures of civilization and enters the wilderness, encounters violence, and finally returns, having through that encounter become a man.

Similarly, historian Richard Slotkin has carefully articulated the broad thesis that “...the Myth of the Frontier relates the achievement of ‘progress’ to a particular form or scenario of violent action,” even as the specific form of progress came to be “defined in different ways” at different stages of American history. He observes, “...[I]n each case, the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune

as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*.”⁹

Of course, such arguments run the risk of being overly-broad. Nevertheless, it remains notable that, even though the frontier was formally closed in 1890, and while few Americans still have a work-related need for a firearm (as a farmer, for example), the instinct remains that when one feels “under attack,” either physically or in some other way, the solution for many Americans (most of them Christian) is to reach for one’s gun. According to sociologist Welch:

All grand narratives, like the one enshrining gun ownership, are based in foundation myths. These myths supply adherents with compelling storylines that ground and stabilize their worldviews. Displacing a grand narrative is an arduous process, resulting in a terrifying sense of vertigo that resists and resents encroachment.¹⁰

There is little doubt that the current political context of gun control and Second Amendment rights at every level of government and in every American state is steeped in just such resistance and resentment.

From Grand Narratives to Vulnerability

We will return to questions of identity and the internalization of grand narratives in a subsequent chapter. But if owning a personal firearm is considered unremarkable, or even commendable, in many American communities, it is not

⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 11-12, author’s italics.

¹⁰ James Welch IV, “Ethos of the Gun: Trajectory of the Gun-Rights Narrative,” in Ben Agger and Timothy W. Luke, eds., *Gun Violence and Public Life* (London: Routledge, 2014), 134.

simply the power of history at work, or the symbolic resonance of old things to help us recall the virtues of our European forebears. The guns that Americans debate are not decommissioned antiques mounted over the fireplace. The fact is, many Americans are scared, and live in communities where owning a gun is seen as a sensible response to that problem. In terms reminiscent of Slotkin, the essayist Marilynne Robinson has written about modern fear, noting that it “...channels anxiety or loneliness or prejudice or resentment into an emotion that can seem to those who indulge in it like shrewdness or courage or patriotism.”¹¹ Similarly, philosopher Firmin DeBrabander asks: “But what if guns in fact make us less free?...Guns are not the condition of freedom at all, but the opposite. They may turn out to be compatible with liberty, but at a certain point, as they proliferate and dominate the public sphere, they chase our civil rights and freedom away.”¹² For DeBrabander, far from being a beneficent technology that liberates citizens from fear, guns “...are a symptom of fear’s domination over society.”¹³

In much the same spirit, there has been a long, rich conversation within the field of criminology about the power of fear-of-crime, as distinct from the power of actual crime, in shaping broader social attitudes and behaviors. Such distinctions seek to make sense of data, including the long-standing statistical observation that fear of crime is increasing even as crime rates are generally falling. This has a direct relationship to gun ownership and overall patterns of gun violence, of course, as fear of crime (often emphasized by the NRA and Second Amendment supporters)

¹¹ Marilynne Robinson, “Fear,” *New York Review of Books*, 24 September 2015.

¹² Firmin DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free? Democracy and the Armed Society*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), xiv.

¹³ DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free?*, xiv.

convinces citizens to purchase guns or, as in the case of “stand your ground” laws, to bring lethal violence when they feel threatened. Along those lines, Robert Young argues that, in fact, gun ownership is rooted more deeply in a generally punitive orientation than a fearful one. He notes that many “are drawn to guns as a means not only of protection from, but retaliation against potential attackers,” and elaborates that guns “...equip the angry individual with the means of successfully confronting and exacting revenge upon those who pose criminal threats.”¹⁴

Ontological Security

Walklate and Mythen, building particularly on the work of Taylor, argue that fear of crime and perceptions of risk need to be framed contextually, with reference to a broader “notion of ‘ontological security’” based on “locally understood ‘structures of feeling.’” Feelings, in turn, needed to be understood “as performing a metaphorical capacity for concerns, not just about crimes in a locality, but about other things going on in local areas.”¹⁵ They remind us that ontological security is “constructed and reconstructed socially,” through a range of contexts: individual, interpersonal, familial, communal, institutional, etc.¹⁶ To extend their thought slightly, it seems clear that through metaphor, the social transactions that occur in these contexts can operate on many different expressions of anxiety simultaneously.

¹⁴ Robert Young, “Fear, Punitive Anger, and Guns: The Social Psychology of Vindictory Firearm Ownership,” in Agger and Luke, *Gun Violence in Public Life*, 120, 125.

¹⁵ Sandra Walklate and Gabe Mythen, “How Scared Are We?” *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (March 2008), 214.

¹⁶ Walklate and Mythen, “How Scared Are We?”, 216.

With regard to fear, their work reminds us that 1) not all fear is the same—that fear is not a monolith; 2) relatedly, that a “culture of fear” is more properly considered as a series of interrelated but distinct “subcultures of fear” expressing their anxieties in a variety of ways; 3) that who is afraid and what that means is, to borrow their phrase “constructed and reconstructed” in ways that can be identified. Even more significantly, notions of “ontological security” as mediated through metaphor and developed through interpersonal/communal/institutional transactions gives a decidedly theological cast to considerations of fear. Furedi has argued that “We ought...to channel greater energy into exploring the meanings attached to fear and the regulations and traditions that govern the way it is experienced and articulated.”¹⁷ Obviously, churches and Christian beliefs represent a significant source for such “regulations and traditions.” More broadly, though, Walklate and Mythen’s emphasis on “ontological security” reminds us to look for a rival, secular “theology” that might be taking shape, with its own anthropology to be sure, but perhaps even its own soteriology.

Disordered fear and *Securitas*

Catholic theologian Scott Bader-Saye has explored fear theologically, with particular reference to Thomistic distinctions that clarify how “disordered and excessive fear” may claim to be Christian but is not. He writes:

Disordered and excessive fear has significant moral consequences. It underwrites an ethic of security in which self-preservation consistently trumps other goods, and it fosters a set of shadow virtues—including

¹⁷ Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear* (London: Continuum, 2002), as quoted in Walklate and Mythen, “How Scared Are We?”, 218.

suspicion, preemption, and control—that threatened traditional Christian virtues such as hospitality, peacemaking, and generosity.¹⁸

He goes on to describe particular ways in which fear can be disordered—that we can fear *what* we should not (because it is not as great or as close as we believe, or because what we fear losing is not in fact good), or that we can fear *as* we should not (that we may fear the proper object but fear it excessively, such that we allow the avoidance of evil to overshadow our pursuit of the good).¹⁹

Lutheran Sturla Stalsett warns that “the dream of invulnerability...or *securitas*” has dire consequences, not only for human flourishing, but even for our humanity in an ontological sense—that vulnerability is, in fact, “constitutive for being human” because to be human is to be *Homo vulnerabilis*, created in the image of *Deus vulnerabilis*.²⁰ He writes:

....being human is being-in-relation to other humans, to nature, to self and to God. Human being is inconceivable outside these relations. Authentic relatedness requires receptivity, openness, affectability, vis-à-vis the being, presence, and acting of other(s) with whom one’s self is related – hence vulnerability.²¹

Of course, on its face, such a description resonates more clearly with the vulnerability of falling in love than it does with that of a woman crossing an empty parking lot alone after dark. But Stalsett surely has a point that *securitas* is a powerful temptation. Because its spiritual and emotional appeal largely eludes restriction—we dream of being absolutely safe, and can always imagine feeling at

¹⁸ Scott Bader-Saye, “Thomas Aquinas and the Culture of Fear,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 25, 2 (2005), 97.

¹⁹ Bader-Saye, 91, 105.

²⁰ Sturla J. Stalsett, “Towards a Political Theology of Vulnerability: Anthropological and Theological Propositions,” *Political Theology*, 16:5 (2015), 468, 476.

²¹ Stalsett, “Political Theology of Vulnerability,” 468.

least “safer” than we currently do—it is all too easy to permit ourselves wide latitude when it comes to how we secure that all-too-elusive end. To the extent that *securitas* prompts us to seek technical solutions, such as owning and carrying a gun, the potential for the emergence of an “independent morality” of that technology is a matter of profound concern, as we will explore in the next chapter.

Furthermore, Stalsett’s description of *Deus vulnerabilis* suggests how traditional accounts of the Trinity may indeed be subsumed into *securitas*. Specifically, the invulnerable God is the One who is ultimately secure. The reality of human finitude, then, means that any aspect of our lives that is not “secure” is a form of diminishment to be borne, if not overcome. Perhaps it might also prompt us to ask where our true security lies—to put our faith in God rather than in human schemes. Yet it may also simply train us to make the idea of invulnerability, rather than the relational being of God, into our ultimate concern.

By contrast, Stalsett proposes the “vulnerable Trinity,” comprised of: “...the Spirit as God ‘outside of Godself,’ *being in and with* God’s wounded Creation; the Son, who demonstrates “God as God-sharing-in-suffering”; and God the Creator as the God who “chooses not to be without the ‘other’ ...[and who] chooses to delimit Godself through creation of non-God.”²² Of course, this vulnerable Trinity resists *securitas* because instead of valuing invulnerability, its very nature creates and joins human finitude. For Stalsett, God’s very nature is to join us within the context of our struggles, imperfections, and ongoing challenge to live within our differences.

²² Stalsett, “Political Theology of Vulnerability,” 475.

Accordingly, any human solidarity made in the divine image would necessarily forego the dangerous illusion of *securitas*.

However, the notion of a vulnerable Trinity might prompt us instead to seek the God who loves within life at its most exposed—to know God within vulnerability rather than despite it. A community organized along such lines would not only embrace difference more deliberately, and thus refuse to be defined and limited by superficial fears and the temptation to seek false unity. Additionally, it might also initiate practices according to the pattern of the Spirit, “being in and with God’s wounded creation,” seeking solidarity even in the face of risk. For example, as expressions of witness, such a community might willingly expose itself to the danger of unsafe streets by organizing a neighborhood watch, or organize itself in support of civil rights and formal protection for minority groups. Surely it would also find domestic violence and suicide, two leading causes of gun violence, as demanding comprehensive response, pastorally, governmentally, and personally.

Situating vulnerability

Stalsett’s work suggests how theological perspectives on vulnerability might prophetically challenge and pastorally support those made afraid and inclined to resolve that fear through owning and carrying a gun. He also reminds us that if violence and conquest represent one “grand narrative” at work in the lives of many American Christians, then surely also the Gospel and its call to suffering love for a wounded Creation is, at the very least, another.

Similarly, in the *Non-Violent Cross*, Catholic theologian James W. Douglass describes God as primarily identified with “the living, Christic reality of suffering love,” expressing solidarity and being present with those who suffer, and urging believers to do the same.²³ Dismantling the violence at the heart of the world’s injustice, even at the cost of martyrdom, is part and parcel of the revolution Jesus comes to inaugurate and leaves for the Church to complete. (The martyrdom is very much included—written in 1968, Douglass’ work draws on Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X as central figures.) He writes: “Suffering love by itself agonizes over man and loses itself in God. Truth directs that love back to the world of man, resists man’s evil non-violently and heals him in ways that can be seen, in terms of human values that must be defended for man go on living.”²⁴

However, commendable as this may be, it does not seem to acknowledge how even theological vulnerability remains dangerously susceptible to cooptation by other grand narratives. For example, while Douglass’ emphasis on a non-violent cross implies a powerful commitment to social justice, its call to seek the truth that “resists man’s evil non-violently” and call to “values that must be defended for man to go on living” might well seem less than wholly non-violent in attitude. Douglass’ understanding of resistance and hope for revolution can make non-violence seem more like a means rather than an end, not so much an expression of the Kingdom as much as a strategy for undoing its enemies. In addition, as James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White have observed: “...[I]f God is indeed determined in his

²³ James W. Douglass, *The Non-Violent Cross: A Theology of Revolution and Peace*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 54.

²⁴ Douglass, *Non-Violent Cross*, 234.

identity by the becoming of his very being among us as a subject of historical evil, then suffering and death, and even moral malice are in some sense ‘ontologically necessary’ in order to the Christian God to be God in Christ.”²⁵ In order to name the complexity and depth of suffering, and ways to name it as contrary to God’s vision for Creation, we may come to describe it as, nevertheless, part of God’s plan for salvation. This can have significant negative pastoral implications for those who suffer--suggesting that, likewise, their pain should be seen as redemptive, and perhaps even a form of blessing.

Stalsett’s emphasis on vulnerability as “constitutive for being human” reminds us that vulnerability is not simply a problem to be solved, but an aspect of our nature to be acknowledged, and a source of temptation to seek false resolution. For example, pro-gun writers like Paxton Quigley write of carrying firearms as in some sense “evening the odds” for vulnerable people in dangerous situations—and make the case that “non-lethal” alternatives (such as martial arts training) do not do so reliably.²⁶ Stalsett reminds us that any Christian response cannot focus simply on the presence of the gun, but must go further to address the vulnerability it seeks to remedy. Moreover, that vulnerability will continue to be a part of human reality, with or without guns, and so the temptation to pursue *securitas* will always be with us in some form. God’s active work of redemption and the Church’s call to promote healing in the name of Christ continue.

²⁵ James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, eds. *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*. (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 21.

²⁶ See Paxton Quigley, *Armed and Female: Taking Control*. (Bellvue, WA: Merrill Press, 2010), Chapter 3.

More provocatively, Anglican Timothy Gorringer challenges the Christian community to find solidarity not simply with innocent victims, but also with the guilty. In an important caution, he notes that “[t]he idea of the victim has been invoked to lever up punitiveness. Sympathy for crime victims can become a cry for vengeance...The last thing anyone thinks of in this culture is forgiveness.”²⁷ For example, the presumptive tendency to cast “criminals as uniquely vicious and irreformable” fails to acknowledge how systemic inequality and desperation play a central crimogenetic role in society, a classic form of scapegoating that permits society as a whole to deny responsibility for its many failures and blind spots.²⁸

By contrast, he builds on the Biblical concept of *shalom*, which he prefers to the English word ‘peace’ because it “has positive connotations of community well-being, of right relationships,” rather than simply “the absence of conflict,” with the clear implication that Christian communities are called to the work of fostering reconciliation, since part of living in covenant means that “[t]he victim of an offence stands for the whole community which is damaged by crime.”²⁹ Rather than endorse the spirit of retributivism or of punishment as a moral need, which fundamentally seem to be caught in the cycle of Girardian mimetic violence, Gorringer argues for a kind of reconciliation “...aimed at bringing the offender to understand the ways in which their behavior has compromised true humanness.”³⁰ It is based on a commitment to reformation over vengeance. Though far from easy,

²⁷ Timothy J. Gorringer, *Crime*. Changing Society and the Churches Series. (London: SPCK, 2004), 118.

²⁸ Gorringer, *Crime*, 14.

²⁹ Gorringer, *Crime*, 17, 134.

³⁰ Gorringer, *Crime*, 90.

forgiveness on such terms represents nothing short of “a form of prevenient grace”, an “acceptance [that]...enables...penitence....”³¹ Similarly, Jesuit John Dear has written: “Grace names the presence of God and God’s active love for humanity at work in our hearts and for the world....God continues to work in us, to be present to us, to love us, and to invite us into God’s own nonviolent life.”³² This sense of invitation is, already, a foretaste of the new life, since it seeks to establish relationship as a way of fostering new perspective, rather than waiting for new and acceptable perspective to rise to the level of finally deserving relationship. As Stalsett might put it, the community “chooses not to be without the ‘other’,” even the guilty other, recognizing that our claims on one another are as fundamentally non-negotiable as God’s claims on us.

Vulnerability and Its Dangers

With hope, Stalsett argues for vulnerability as “constitutive of being human,” and possibly even redemptive in its call to acknowledge human interdependence and God’s invitation to live with deeper empathy. Yet it is important to acknowledge that vulnerability is not simply that. Less optimistically, it also presents a perennial tendency for temptation by the many idols of *securitas*--as the lure of power and control--just as surely as it is a call to solidarity with and in a wounded creation. Furthermore, in the context of patriarchy, the call to embrace vulnerability can be misconstrued as a call, particularly to women, to embrace powerlessness and a lack

³¹ Gorringer, *Crime*, 135.

³² John Dear, *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Non-Violence*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 64-5.

of control, with physical and emotional suffering misunderstood as simply the price of love, or even mistakenly prized as a gracious opportunity to share in the sufferings of Jesus. Vulnerability can operate as a summons to self-abnegation.

Building on the “constructive Womanist concept of salvation” of Dolores Williams, Stephanie Crumpton has argued:

Christ’s redemptive power is located in his focus on rejecting defiling sociopolitical processes. Christ’s life--not his surrogate death--redeems humankind. His life and ministry are replete with examples of systemic transformation of dehumanizing practices and structures that defile individuals and communities.³³

For if, as Walklate and Mythen contend, ontological security is “constructed and reconstructed socially,” through a range of contexts: individual, interpersonal, familial, communal, institutional, etc., it is important to note that vulnerability is, as well, and often in ways that contribute to violence against women, among many other groups.

Less obviously, perhaps, many gun owners would argue that rejecting this kind of vulnerability is precisely the point of having a gun. By their logic, gun ownership offers a form of self-empowerment and liberation that deserves respect. In Walklate and Mythen’s terms, the lack of ontological security that restricts and diminishes an individual life finds (if only temporary, partial) resolution, thanks to the presence of a gun, in a deeper sense of personal safety. Nor are the benefits restricted to the individual carrier alone. Quite to the contrary, it seems clear that to extend such security as one can provide to others -- to own a gun in order to protect

³³ Stephanie M. Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 20.

one's family, for example -- is a form of care and seeks their good. The National Rifle Association's monthly magazine, *American Rifleman*, runs a monthly column called "The Armed Citizen" which seeks to highlight such stories of self-defense or good Samaritan interventions in just these terms.

Unfortunately, the line between intentions and effects can prove murky, as even some gun-rights advocates pointedly caution. Legally, the rules of engagement in the name of self-defense are grounded in a series of conditions and thresholds that can shift even in the midst of a brief armed encounter, and even for those with excellent training in the proper, legal use of their weapon. This is an important reminder that, in practice, vulnerability is a condition that cannot be resolved simply in any sense, and certainly not just by carrying a gun--if only because, in a moment, despite whatever vulnerabilities structured the lead up to any given encounter, for any number of reasons, the defender can become the aggressor. The context of the interaction can change significantly. Morally, the duty of care for one's dependents can and does coexist with a duty of care even for a home intruder or a belligerent racist, however difficult this may be to acknowledge, much less embrace. One of the inherent moral hazards of owning a gun is that as the line between responding to a threat and reacting to one's fears begins to blur, the power to "shoot first and ask questions later" is literally in one's hands. Yet clearly, the questions one must ask remain significant.

Conclusion

As the Church seeks to understand vulnerability, both as a fear to be addressed and perhaps as a form of openness to be claimed, it will need to acknowledge that vulnerabilities are experienced differently according to one's context and social location. Like sin, vulnerability may be, as Stalsett says, "constitutive of human reality"-- a fundamental part of human nature that cannot be definitively resolved or evaded. Nevertheless, the consequences of vulnerability, and the fear it evokes, are not evenly distributed. The reality is that death at the hands of one's partner is a closer danger for women than it is for men, to name just one example. Of course, the threat of losing power and control may feel like "vulnerability" to an abuser, and may prompt violent response, as a result. Moreover, the temptation of such control may reflect how abusers, too, are all too often victims of larger systems and forces that rob them of their very capacity for peace and love toward those closest to them.

Yet, as Miguel De La Torre has argued:

To remain silent or to do nothing in the face of violence is to participate in it through complicity. At times, in the face of violence being committed upon the marginalized, some purposely remain silent or speak their disapproval in muted voices, lest they jeopardize their privileged space.³⁴

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly challenges the privileged religious spaces and the elites whose status was embodied in such spaces. In that spirit, Christians would do well to interrogate their own fears, and the compromises they are prepared to make in order to feel safe, or at least, safer.

³⁴ Miguel De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics From the Margins*, 2nd edition. (New York, Orbis, 2015), 117.

Of course, for many American Christians, owning a gun is a compromise they are ready and willing to make. In part, their readiness comes out of a sense that it is the user who defines the moral or immoral use of the gun -- that "guns don't kill; people kill," and therefore, that any compromises are wholly within the carrier's control. It is to this claim that we now turn.

Chapter Two: Instrumentality

Introduction

Founded in the year 2000 after an influential article by Jonathan Rauch in the online magazine *Salon*, the Pink Pistols is an LGBT organization “dedicated to the legal, safe, responsible use of firearms for the self-defense of the sexual-minority community.” Writing in the aftermath of the violent death of gay student Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, Rauch called for the LGBT community to fight (imposed as well as internalized) stereotypes of its own weakness and passivity, to arm itself and train—and to broadcast widely that it was doing so, in order to secure a larger deterrent effect against violence toward the whole LGBT community nationwide. The Pink Pistols has emerged as a response to his call, affirming on their website that: “We teach queers to shoot, then teach the world that we have done it.” It currently has over 50 active chapters in the US, as well as two in Canada.

The organization has also been active legally, occasionally joining forces with the National Rifle Association on behalf of Second Amendment rights. For example, the Pink Pistols filed *amicus* briefs in the famous *D.C. vs. Heller* case, and more recently, in *D.C. vs. Grace*, where it argued that, as a particular class of vulnerable persons, members of the LGBT community should qualify for broad permission to carry concealed firearms—that they should be asked to meet a less stringent legal threshold in explaining a defined “need” for such weapons than that required of other citizens applying for such permission.

Their perspective on gun rights is much harder to dispute than the generalized “fear of crime” in other social contexts, particularly among majority

communities and in places where *actual* crime is demonstrably declining. Indeed, even members of the group “Gays Against Guns,” which is also a national organization, see beyond the obvious differences in their work to a great deal of common ground. According to one member of the latter: “I think Gays Against Guns and the Pink Pistols have the same feelings, but we express them differently....We have the same fears.” However, from his perspective: “Guns may make us feel physically safe, but psychically we’re not safe...[F]eeling emotionally safe [is different] than relying on this external device.”³⁵ But where Gays Against Guns works to restrict guns and reduce violence generally, the Pink Pistols challenge violence by inviting would-be assailants to “Pick on Someone Your Own Caliber.”

This chapter will consider the implications of what it is to rely on a handgun as an “external device,” a technology that some consider morally neutral in itself, although open to good and bad uses and/or users. It will especially address the implications of guns as a means to order, which is similar to but distinct from “peace,” although not all gun owners would likely embrace such a distinction. Finally, it will seek to understand some of the key implications of the difference.

Just a Tool

As a long-standing advocate for women’s right to bear arms, Paxton Quigley observes: “...being prepared for the statistical long shot of being a victim of violent crime is really no more extraordinarily prudent than wearing a seat belt in a car or

³⁵ Andrew Blonsky, “Pink Pistols: LGBT Gun Owners Unite In Arming Gay Community.” *Rolling Stone*, June 28, 2016. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/pink-pistols-lgbt-gun-owners-unite-in-arming-gay-community-20160628>. Accessed 13 November 2016.

having a fire extinguisher in the kitchen.”³⁶ Gun activist and Baptist minister Rev. Kenn Blanchard identifies what he sees as a significant degree of paranoia among political progressives with regard to “...the mechanical device known as the gun,” making of it something that it is not, while he sees it simply “...like the sharpened ax that sat at the ready on the stump next to the pile of wood in the backyard” of his grandmother’s home when he was a boy.³⁷ Similarly, Conservative commentator Glenn Beck notes that while it is beyond dispute that there are tragic gun deaths, the point is that they are tragic, not that they are caused by guns, *per se*. He writes: “...we end up focusing so much on the *how* of these crimes--the weapon itself--that we stop ourselves from asking the far more appropriate question: *why?*...[T]he weapon didn’t really matter; it was just a tool.”³⁸ Finally, Rabbi Dovid Bendory of Jews For the Preservation of Firearms Ownership has argued:

A firearm in the hands of a righteous defender, whether police officer or civilian, is a tool for goodness in the world. A firearm in the hands of a criminal or madman a tool for evil. Intentions matter...Let us always remember the responsibilities we have as righteous, law-abiding gun owners.³⁹

Of course, such responses expressly reject the claim that a gun represents an inherent moral hazard, even as they acknowledge the power of this particular tool and can name that as a quality. It is notable that, like Bendory, they argue that the

³⁶ Paxton Quigley, *Armed and Female: Taking Control*. (Bellvue, WA: Merrill Press, 2010), 45.

³⁷ Reverend Kenn Blanchard, *Black Man With a Gun: Reloaded* (No Cited Place of Publication: White Feather Press, 2013), iii, 3.

³⁸ Glenn Beck, *Control: Exposing the Truth About Guns*. (New York: Threshold Editions/Mercury Radio Arts, 2013), xii-xiii.

³⁹ Rabbi Dovid Bendory, “Intentions Matter” 2014 *The Rabbi’s Pages*, Jews For the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, <http://jpfo.org/rabbi/rabbi-intentions-matter.htm>. Accessed 18 November 2016.

virtue of the individual user is sufficient to overcome the danger of that power, and yet remain committed to the neutrality of its being “just a tool.” For example, Blanchard observes: “From the time he or she picks up a firearm, the shooter becomes part of a system over which he or she has complete control. You are the only part of the system that can make a gun safe – or unsafe.”⁴⁰ Yet following such logic, those who claim guns are passive tools, particularly to secure or establish order in the face of chaos, both fail to acknowledge the chaos the guns themselves bring, and the way in which they structure human experience to seek the chaotic in an increasingly desperate and futile search for order.

Along these lines, Noreen Herzfeld has described the Amish of southeastern Pennsylvania, and noted their particular awareness of the moral and spiritual impact of bringing a new tool into their communities. Thus, she notes, the Amish will embrace certain technologies, such as solar panels, refrigerated milk tanks in the barn (powered by gasoline generators) but not refrigerators in the kitchen, outdoor telephones at the road but not in the home. When assessing the place of a new technology, Herzfeld suggests the Amish ask three key questions: “First, does the technology provide tangible benefits to the community or to individuals within that community?...Second, does the technology change the relationship of the individual to the community?...Third, does the technology change the nature of the community itself?”⁴¹ Simply stated, the Amish recognize the power of tools.

Moreover, they recognize that what might indeed be good for the individual has the

⁴⁰ Blanchard, *Black Man with a Gun*, 95.

⁴¹ Noreen Herzfeld, *Technology and Religion: Remaining Human in a Co-created World*. (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2009), 17-18.

power to change the community, and thus, that the community has a distinct say in the matter. The order for which they strive is held in common, not privately.

Whose Order is It?

Jacques Ellul's thinking on "technique" is useful in this context, for as he observes, "Technique never observes the distinction between moral and immoral use. It tends, on the contrary, to create a completely independent morality."⁴² He cautions against the "autonomy" of technology, which is to say, that while any given technological breakthrough may begin as the means to an end, it so quickly and completely comes to be an end in itself--such a given--that it ceases to have any inherent ethics of its own, but only faulty users or the particular flaws in specific examples (such as a particular gun that malfunctions).⁴³ Thus, while great deal of gun-rights literature is quick to emphasize that a gun is "just a tool," from Ellul's perspective this is hardly exculpatory. Rather, it is precisely the autonomous nature of guns as a technology that is being revealed. If the National Rifle Association argues that "guns don't kill; people kill," then for Ellul, what is being denied is how the nature of personhood itself may be reshaped by the technology.

For Ellul, this represents the ongoing process through which the initial rebellion of the fall results not in successful reconciliation, but in vain attempts to remedy the consequences of that rebellion through behaviors that only distance us

⁴² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 97.

⁴³ See Ellul, *Technological Society*, 134, as quoted in Jeffrey P. Greenman, Read Mercer Schuchardt and Noah J. Toly, *Understanding Jacques Ellul*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 33-4.

further from God. Rene Girard has written extensively of the relationship of violence and *mimesis*, the human impulse to desire what others desire, possess what they possess, and be what they are.⁴⁴ With great sophistication, he explores the social mechanisms whereby social competitors avoid violence between them by unconsciously identifying a mutual scapegoat, then sanctioning the use of communal violence in eliminating that scapegoat, and so achieving a temporary social equilibrium and sense of unity. In Girardian terms, guns were created and developed by humans caught in the perpetual cycles of mimetic conflict. Moreover, all too often, the mimetic cycle reflects the inevitable escalation of (disordered) desires that seek to satisfy our inherent longing for God, but that only God can satisfy. Along those lines, William Stringfellow has written: “The fall means the reign of chaos throughout creation now, so that even that which is ordained by the ruling powers as ‘order’ is, in truth, chaotic.”⁴⁵ Speaking broadly, that order can only properly be found in God, who offers life as part of a redeemed anthropology, which is to say, a way of understanding human life in different terms that sees flourishing outside of the perennial struggle for safety.

In the opening pages of *The Meaning of The City*, Ellul offers a reading of the Biblical story of Cain that speaks directly to the struggle for safety as a search for order. Underlying the search for order, he identifies a central temptation to focus solely on one’s own needs. According to Ellul, after Cain murders his brother, he

⁴⁴ See for example, Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).

⁴⁵ William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 38, as quoted in John Dear, *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Non-Violence*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 60.

wanders without human or divine protection, for by his action, he has “...introduced insecurity, the taste for blood, for vengeance....Cain has broken the relationship between man and the world, so that he will necessarily be a fugitive and a wanderer.”⁴⁶ In time, he comes to found the first city, which Ellul sees as a fundamental metaphor for the human attempt to construct the world on our own terms, and according to our own wishes. But strikingly, he argues that “Cain is completely dissatisfied with the security granted to him by God, and so he searches out his own security...[The city] is a material sign of his security. He is responsible for himself and for his life. He is far from the Lord’s face, and so he will shift for himself.”⁴⁷

One cannot help but note the parallels between Ellul’s reading of Cain and the impulse behind gun ownership and protection of Second Amendment rights. The experience of dissatisfaction with one’s own security and attempt to fend for oneself accordingly is widely acknowledged by many gun owners, however unlikely that they would further admit responsibility for some of the further fallenness of the world since the expulsion from Eden. It seems more likely that they would see themselves as preventing the world from getting still worse. But Ellul’s point, as Greenman, Schuchardt, et al., have suggested, is that “...the construction of the first city is an act of rebellion against God.”⁴⁸ The self-reliance to which so many gun owners appeal may already be contrary to the divine intention. For example, if the National Rifle Association makes the claim that “The solution to the problem of a

⁴⁶ Jacques Ellul, Dennis Pardee, trans., *The Meaning of the City*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 2.

⁴⁷ Ellul, *Meaning of the City*, 4-5.

⁴⁸ Greenman, Schuhardt, et al., *Understanding Ellul*, 69.

bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” Ellul helps us to remember that the dream of “shifting [i.e., fending] for oneself,” even as a “good guy” may still be rebelliously moving away from God. After all, if (as the NRA has also suggested) “an armed society is a polite society,” it seems fair to wonder what else might be said about life in such a place. In such a light, it seems to imagine a world in which mutually assured destruction underwrites a broad ethic of tolerance. But the God who affirms in Genesis 2:18 that “it is not good that the man should be alone” appears to hold a different, more interdependent vision for human flourishing. This seems to point beyond mere tolerance and toward a deeper acceptance and respect, or even love, with human connection at the center. Politeness, as such, not only falls short of such a deeper invitation; it may even resist it. Ellul might suggest that it is precisely this deeper invitation that Cain fails to understand. His is a dream of order, control, and more broadly, of the world on his terms.

On the other hand, who can convince a parent not to worry about a child and to do what it takes to keep her safe? For those who live in a chaotic, unsafe area, all well and good to lobby the ruling powers for improved policing--who will watch the neighborhood in the meantime? Recalling the Pink Pistols, if members of a marginalized community cannot trust police to protect them, as many cannot, surely they are not supposed to let that chaos go unchallenged. What about the God of Genesis, who brings order from chaos? Theological approaches to violence need to make a careful distinction between idolatrous worship of order for order’s sake, which are often associated domination and power, and a universal suspicion of order in all its forms. Thus, while any desire for order may well be caught in cycles

of mimetic conflict, surely it cannot be considered wholly inappropriate or “disordered” in any simple sense. Many caught in such circumstances may well see quite clearly that flourishing lies outside the perennial struggle for safety, but conclude that, for reasons not of their choosing, they are caught in that struggle and must respond accordingly.

Guns as a “Necessary Evil”

It is for this reason that many gun-carrying Christians One such “sympathetic” view of gun ownership is offered by Baptist Wayne Grudem, which stops well short of enthusiasm for guns but recognizes them as a necessary evil, consistent with the right to defend oneself, which he identifies in the account of Jesus and the swords in Luke 22:36-38. In addition, Grudem finds pacifism more or less incoherent, a rejection of government in general that is unwarranted by Scripture, and clearly contrary to the teaching of Genesis 9:5-6, “...and in the historical narratives and laws in Exodus to Deuteronomy and Judges to 2 Chronicles,” as well as the Epistles in the New Testament, which is to say, even if Jesus never explicitly endorsed the idea of proportional response embodied by “just war” theory, such proportionality is still broadly consistent with the Word of God. As he responds to one liberal critic: “...this form of argument fails to recognize that the *whole Bible* was given to us by God.”⁴⁹ More broadly, many pro-gun Christian writers seem less concerned with proportionality than they are with some version

⁴⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 38. Author’s italics.

of what just-war theory describes as “proper authority” within the *jus ad bellum*. While none engage just war theory directly, the right of individuals to defend themselves in nearly any situation is explored in detail, and is articulated not as merely permitted, but as positively required. To do less is nothing short of sinful.

Indeed, for Grudem, the premise of pacifism seems *prima facie* unthinkable, even for Christians.

If I found a criminal attacking my wife or children, I would use all my physical strength and all the physical force at my disposal [and by extension, would feel the right to use a gun if he so chose] against him, not to persuade him to trust in Christ as his Savior, but to immediately stop him from harming my wife and children!⁵⁰

Clearly, Grudem’s sense of the permissibility of gun rights for Christians comes out of a general sense that they are merely a means to an obviously commendable end—the safety of the family. Yet even granting that (and it’s unclear one should, since whether the family, or safety itself can become an ultimate end that exists in tension with the call of the Gospel, or even run contrary to it, seems important to consider), Grudem seems to imagine guns as entirely instrumental objects, and more importantly, *violence itself* as largely instrumental, too. His issue is narrowly how and why you use it.

Unfortunately, the slope is far more slippery than that. Walter Wink has noted “[r]edemptive violence gives way to violence as an end in itself...[It is] no longer the means to a higher good, namely order; violence itself becomes the goal.”⁵¹

Can guns specifically and violence generally really be understood as narrowly as

⁵⁰ Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible*, 42.

⁵¹ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 25.

Grudem does? Grudem's understanding of force does not admit that physical force can decisively shape the lives of both the one who uses and the one who receives it, much less that an entire "domination system" might emerge out of that reality, or that Christ was a victim of that system, and that one largely defensible consequence for those called to be his disciples is, accordingly, to dismantle such a system. Yet one need not go as far as Wink does to see that the means are rarely neutral in themselves, and that this often has ethical consequences independent of one's intentions (as "just war theory" seeks to articulate).

Koinonia in Dangerous World

For those Christians opposed to guns, it seems all but self-evident that a gun can never be simply an "external device" or tool that waits entirely on the intent of the user. For those who are not opposed to its use, a gun carried for the purpose of protection may not be an absolute good, but may well be a relative one: a necessary evil that permits the protection of the innocent and vulnerable in a world already deeply marked by random violence, persistent brokenness and sin. Yet what happens as the technology comes to shape the user--as one's sense of threats and strategies for handling them begins to shift? If explicit pacifism represents too bright a line for most Christians, how can they avoid the slippery slope of materially contributing to the dangerousness of the world that already worries them so? In such a light, it seems possible that the Pink Pistols, or churches like Rocky Mount UMC in Jemison, Alabama have it right--that teaching vulnerable people who choose to bear arms how to do so in an effective, safe, loving, and even "Christian" way is a practice that Christians ought to commend.

Moreover, it seems all too possible that a commitment to non-violence may be a reflection of one's privilege rather than the depth of one's faith. As Miguel De La Torre observes: "...[W]hile those of the dominant culture continue to struggle with the issue of whether violence can be ethically employed, for the marginalized, violence is already a reality."⁵² Those in areas with relatively little crime (especially violent crime) and generally effective policing, or where military service is not a significant means of economic stability or mobility may well choose to find guns distasteful or unnecessary in ways that other communities cannot afford to do. Moreover, relatively affluent Christians may not easily recognize the extent to which the maintenance of their peaceful enclaves depends on the availability of others to secure borders that remain out of the view of those within. Maybe the people of Jemison, Alabama should be commended for their willingness to get their hands dirty, as it were.

Yet Jurgen Moltmann has written about "vicious cycles of death," a whole series of interconnected cycles of depredation and destruction that resist easy redemption.⁵³ Guns and the havoc they can bring are surely symptomatic of the operation of such cycles. Moreover, it is telling that while enclaves such as the church shooting range are nominally open for all, the clientele is overwhelmingly white and middle class. This makes it harder to take its affirmations of being open and available for all, an institution of a truly common good, at face value.

⁵² De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics*, 112.

⁵³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. Anniversary Edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 480-484.

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that those on the “receiving end” of white Christian privilege are far more critical about embracing the necessary evil of instrumental violence, and the tools used to effect it. Womanist theologian and Episcopal priest Kelly Brown Douglas argues that those on the margins offer a powerful counter-testimony, affirming God’s power to liberate all Creation from cycles of violence. She quotes a seminal essay by Audre Lorde, which reminds us that: “*The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*”⁵⁴ Thinking specifically about the cross as Christian symbol, Douglas writes: “God does not fight death with death. God does not utilize the violence exhibited by the cross to defeat deadly violence itself...The freedom of God that is life requires a liberation from [these] very weapons.”⁵⁵ Thus, resurrection affirms the fundamental freedom of a God who is wholly Other, “free from all finite, limiting, human-constructed realities,” and therefore, not subject to the labels and expectations of anyone, and particularly not of those who would use the Divine as part of a strategy for domination and control.⁵⁶ That divine freedom “expresses itself...through fostering and nurturing life,” and is a freedom that “stands in opposition to death.”⁵⁷ The politics of domination in all its forms is manifestly

⁵⁴ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider*. (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 112, as quoted in Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (New York: Orbis, 2015), 183. Italics in original.

⁵⁵ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 183.

⁵⁶ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 144.

⁵⁷ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 147.

contrary to the God who is the author of life and who wishes for each person the freedom to live out “fully who one is.”⁵⁸

Her vision, then, is for the Church to recognize its own impulses to hunker down and protect its privilege, and to push beyond such impulses and “step out” to engage in dismantling the unjust structures that deny the freedom of God. She writes:

The challenge for white churches is to step out of the space of cherished white property to be where Jesus is, with the crucified class of people...If Jesus crossing over was an exodus event, then for white churches it would be *ekstasis*, a stepping outside of themselves.⁵⁹

In the end, perhaps it is only by stepping outside of themselves that white Christians will be able to how their lives have been diminished, their own worlds made smaller, and their faith compromised by their reflexive turn to the false safety of their guns.

Conclusion

On a national and international stage, the nuclear era challenged the Church to rearticulate its commitment to peace-making and non-violence in broader theological terms--recognizing, for example, that rejection of certain weapons was also at heart of caring for Creation, and showing the reality of human interdependence (like it or not). It argued for a careful consideration of nuclear weapons as a means, recognizing that once deployed, nobody would be capable of managing the consequences, and clarified why this was not consistent with God's

⁵⁸ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 151.

⁵⁹ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 201.

will in broadly Christian ecumenical terms. Analogously, ongoing work on guns and violence as a public health crisis draws on the science of epidemiology, “which identifies risk factors, trends, and cause of health problems” to look with a similarly interdependent lens at guns-as-means.⁶⁰ From the public health perspective, managing the medical consequences of shooting a gun may be the heroic, compassionate work of a skilled medical team, but healing injury is not to be confused with promoting health. Theologically, the call to promote human flourishing, while admittedly broad, suggests that our talents, skills and tools cannot focus exclusively on defending our own. They must also be deployed in ways that celebrate life as gift and work to dismantle the violence that diminishes life. To limit the impact of the *effects* of violence (by owning a gun), rather than get at its roots (by engaging with others) is at best to focus on a decidedly proximate good.

In particular, the Church needs to find its voice regarding the powerful and competing frameworks through which people make sense of their fears and losses--work that is both formally theological and actively relational and pastoral. An ethics that is grounded more firmly in a sense of God’s intentions toward the world and characteristic ways of acting on those intentions is perhaps better positioned to reach people in their deep desire to protect what and whom they hold most dear, but invite them to understand that commitment in ever-widening circles of concern and relationship.

Yet it must be admitted that the heroism has a powerful allure, particularly as some Christians understand carrying guns as a fundamental expression of their

⁶⁰ David Hemenway, *Private Guns, Public Health*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 9.

faith, as we saw in Grudem -- or even a form of Christian vocation. That is where we now turn.

Chapter Three: Identity

Introduction

In January 2010, the US television network ABC news reported that Trijicon, a Michigan-based manufacturer of precision gun-sights for high powered rifles used by the US, UK, and New Zealand militaries, acting on its own initiative, had been etching citations mostly from the New Testament in the serial numbers on its equipment, unbeknownst to any of its customers. For example, its “AccuPoint” site bore the serial number “RXnn REV21:23,” a reference to Revelation 21:23: “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” Other gun sites made by the company included references to Matthew 5:6 and to 1 Thessalonians 5:5, among many others, most of them allusions to light or sight.⁶¹

According to ABC News, the company was surprised by the outcry, given its long-standing and very public profession of its mission as a Christian business. As its website affirmed at the time:

Guided by our values, we endeavor to have our products used wherever precision aiming solutions are required to protect individual freedom...We believe that America is great when its people are good...This goodness has been based on Biblical standards throughout our history, and we will strive to follow those morals.⁶²

⁶¹ Joseph Rhee, Tahman Bradley and Brian Ross, “U.S. Military Weapons Inscribed With Secret 'Jesus' Bible Codes,” *ABCNews Online* 18 January 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/us-military-weapons-inscribed-secret-jesus-bible-codes/story?id=9575794>. Accessed 2 February 2017; “Trijicon Biblical Verses Controversy,” *Wikipedia*, last modified 17 November 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trijicon_biblical_verses_controversy. Accessed 2 February 2017.

⁶² As reported in Rhee, Bradley and Ross, *ABC News Online*, “U.S. Military Weapons...”

Nevertheless, ultimately threatened with the cancellation of its contracts, Trijicon agreed to cease the practice and offered kits to remove the verses on units it had already sold for those who wished to do so.

Assuming that Trijicon is engaged in something deeper than a cynical marketing ploy, it is difficult to make sense of what the Christian markings on such weapons are meant to communicate, and to whom. Any given gun-site or gun is hardly a bold, public witness to the Gospel in itself--indeed, in the case of the Trijicon gun sites, even most of the soldiers using them would not have been aware of their Scriptural allusions in the first place. Yet whether the users are entirely aware of it or not, the efficacy of their weapons has been claimed for Christ.

For those who *are* aware of the symbolism, the “Christianizing” of guns seems intended almost as a kind of inside joke. One imagines the moment of understanding for the soldier who notices the serial number and takes out a Bible to look up his gun scope’s cited verse. Perhaps to understand the symbolism is to be not only “in on the joke,” but actually something more insidious--it is to recognize oneself as one of the tribe. They are examples of “dog whistle politics,” strategically using code words with little resonance to the general population “but with a different meaning to a targeted part of the audience”--in this case, a certain segment of gun-carrying Christians.⁶³

Why not *all* gun-carrying Christians? This chapter will argue that while American Christians of all denominations have the legal right to own guns, the

⁶³ “Dog whistle politics” in <http://politicaldictionary.com/words/dog-whistle-politics/>. Accessed 28 February 2017.

relationship between faith and guns is understood very differently among different groups. For some, guns play a significant role within the broader claims of American civil religion--so much so that one can scarcely be understood without the other. Carrying guns is a form of civic responsibility understood in ultimate terms, which is to say, religiously. For others, this is not the case. This contextual distinction will also suggest why discussion around faith and guns can prove so difficult, and why it remains generally so difficult to generate a broad consensus for gun safety among American Christians: because while all concerned "claim Christ," they relate to Christian claims (and those of citizenship) quite differently.

"Condition Yellow" and Civic Responsibility

Before exploring the responsibility of gun-ownership as understood by some American Christians, it is important to recognize that such thinking occurs within a broader conversation about responsible citizenship, particularly for white American men.

For example, writing about the experience of carrying a (legally permitted) concealed handgun, journalist Dan Baum describes the experience of going about one's daily routine in "a heightened state of vigilance" known as "condition yellow" – in which, for example, where one sits in a restaurant, how one sizes up a stranger coming through the door, how one reads the body language of others nearby, etc., reflects the endless playing out of instantaneously appearing life-or-death

situations. One man Baum interviews admits, “It can be fun. But it can also be exhausting.”⁶⁴

Along similar lines, sociologist Angela Stroud argues that:

The vast majority of CHLs [Concealed Handgun Licensees] will never need to draw their firearms in public. Thus what is most significant about CHLs...is not what happens in the moment a gun is drawn but in what they contribute to the cultural meaning systems that shape how we see ourselves and each other.⁶⁵

Significantly, Stroud notes that for many CHLs, carrying guns is closely aligned with larger notions of the common good. For example, as she describes, concealed carry firearms training often emphasizes the importance of CHLs as “shepherds” for the community. (Moreover, at such training, those who choose not to carry are explicitly known as “sheep,” to which we will return shortly.⁶⁶) The outline of a larger duty of care is clearly present in much of this thinking. Similarly, Jennifer Carlson has studied concealed-carry permit holders in Michigan, many of whom consider themselves “citizen-protectors” of their nearest and dearest. She writes:

The act of carrying a gun...[becomes] a weight on the hip and on the mind. The exercise of gun rights is not a way to *talk* about solutions to problems of social insecurity, but to *practice* a solution by embracing a particular variant of good citizenship (the citizen-protector) that sets gun carriers apart from others...To gun carriers, the gun represents an affirmation of one’s commitment to life....⁶⁷

That said, Carlson also notes that in her study, “...gun carriers articulated criminality in a variety of key ways, but a language of exclusion was often at work, implicitly or

⁶⁴ Dan Baum, “Happiness Is a Worn Gun: My Concealed Weapon and Me,” *Harper’s* (August 2010), 29-38, as quoted in Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss, *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24-25.

⁶⁵ Angela Stroud, *Good Guys With Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 27.

⁶⁶ Stroud, *Good Guys With Guns*, 34.

⁶⁷ Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 171. Author’s italics.

explicitly, as the men talked about protecting ‘their’ families and ‘their’ communities.”⁶⁸ Following her logic, any notion of a broader duty of care, therefore, might be better understood as a depth of care--as a deeper rather than a wider circle--on behalf of whom the carrier makes a life or death commitment.

However, what is more significant about deciding to live at “condition yellow” on behalf of one’s family and friends may be the “language of exclusion” Carlson notes in those who carry guns. It suggests how guns can teach their users to see the world in terms of stark polarities, such as friend or foe, neutral presence or threat.

Moreover, even within these polarities, it will be clear that categories such as “friend” or “neutral,” rather than possessing positive attributes of their own, are more clearly understood as an absence of red-flags in the judgment of the protector, while the world itself is poised to become a terrifying place, in which each new encounter is a threat to be assessed rather than a person or place to be known.

Indeed, for some, this lack of recognition may even be a matter of principle. As firearms trainer and Second Amendment advocate (and Missouri-Synod Lutheran) Paul G. Markel observes: “When a man sets himself on the path of evil, of violence and villainy, he deliberately forfeits the social titles of ‘brother, son, husband, or friend.’ He has made himself a monster and is justly dealt with as such.”⁶⁹ Second Amendment attorney Greg Hopkins writes: “ ‘But the attacker is a fellow human being,’ cries the pacifist. True, but his intent and felonious acts have

⁶⁸ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 167.

⁶⁹ Paul G. Markel, *Faith and the Patriot: A Belief Worth Fighting For*. (No Place of Publication: A Patriot Fire Team Book, 2015), 44.

separated us from him in that moment...His morals and goals are alien to those of typical humans, and we must meet his violence *with God's morality* until he is no longer a threat.”⁷⁰

Similarly, a widely-cited authority on guns, Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, emphasizes three kinds of people in the world: sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs:

If you have no capacity for violence then you are a healthy productive citizen: a sheep. If you have a capacity for violence and no empathy for your fellow-citizens, then you have defined an aggressive sociopath--a wolf. But what if you have a capacity for violence, and a deep love for your fellow citizens? Then you are a sheepdog, a warrior, someone who is walking the hero's path. Someone who can walk into the heart of darkness, into the universal human phobia, and walk out unscathed.⁷¹

A Christian Responsibility

If Grossman's language ends in decidedly religious overtones, other authors make the connection between faith and gun ownership more explicit. Baptist pastor and former police officer Tim Rupp asks: “Where do warriors come from? Many people are unwilling to use deadly force against another human being, and that's okay. That's the way God made them. We need these people...I also believe that God instilled in the hearts of some a warrior spirit--the spirit of a protector.”⁷² Citing Ecclesiastes 3, he argues: “there is a time when the protection of the innocent

⁷⁰ Greg Hopkins, *A Time to Kill: The Myth of Christian Pacifism*. (Florence, Alabama: Mindbridge Press, 2013), 77, my emphasis.

⁷¹ Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, from *On Combat*, (No Place of Publication: Warrior Science Publications, 2008), as excerpted in Bryan Donihue, *What They Don't Tell You About Church Safety*. (Grand Rapids, Sheepdog Development, 2014), 147.

⁷² Tim Rupp, *Pistol in the Pulpit: A Biblical and Tactical Response to Active Shooters in the House of Worship*. (Idaho Falls: Snowfall Press, 2016), 85

involves killing an aggressor.”⁷³ In his view, Evil is real, its sources are ultimately mysterious, and to fight it is what real Christians do. That American Christians are guaranteed the right to proper tools for that battle is nothing short of providential.

He notes:

God instituted human government to rule and protect human life. Police and military are duly commissioned to carry out that charge. God commissioned husbands to protect their wives and parents to protect their children. Thankfully, in America, the government understands the necessity to allow its citizens the right to act upon those commissions.⁷⁴

Similarly, church security expert Carl Chinn, who offers a detailed description of an active shooter incident in 2007 at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, sees such interventions as a powerful ministry to which some are especially called. Thus the off-duty police officer who missed the critical incident by moments “was robbed of any opportunity to participate in the negotiation for lives of the innocent,” while the security officer who ultimately shot the intruder “...crushed the momentum of evil...with the authority enveloping her in those critical moments.”⁷⁵ As Greg Hopkins suggests above, these armed protectors are clearly to be seen as nothing less than agents of “God’s morality” itself.

The profound interconnection of responsible citizenship and Christian identity is perhaps most obvious in the writing of Paul Markel, who asks: “As a person of faith and a patriot, do you believe that it is your duty as a Christian and an

⁷³ Rupp, *Pistol in the Pulpit*, 81.

⁷⁴ Rupp, *Pistol in the Pulpit*, 175.

⁷⁵ Rupp, *Pistol in the Pulpit*, 115, 143.

American citizen to do all in your power to save the life of the innocent?...Are you content with victim status?"⁷⁶ Elsewhere, he notes:

Many of my friends in the martial world eschew Christianity from the misconception that to be a Christian means that you must be submissive to the will of evil men. They view Christians as weak-willed people who would "turn the other cheek" and allow themselves and their families to be abused by criminals and vermin. Christians have been equated with pacifists who, rather than risk their lives for the preservation and security of their country, instead choose the temporary physical safety of non-commitment.⁷⁷

For Markel, the grave danger facing Church appears to be the temptation to permit its own weakness. It is also weakness of a particular political cast, for he cautions:

"If a man would lead your congregation and pepper their sentences with words like 'injustice,' 'tolerance,' 'fairness' and 'equality' your liberty radar should be pinging hard and loud. Those...are the speech patterns of a socialist...."⁷⁸ Similarly, Greg

Hopkins reflects on the lessons from the story of King David, noting,

David understood that ultimately, true Evil cannot be waited out, compromised with, or appeased. Evil must be defeated...Pacifists fail to recognize that over the past two centuries, war gave Americans independence, freed the slaves and made them citizens, destroyed Nazism, and destroyed the equally militarist/racist Japanese Empire....⁷⁹

Of course, one might make the argument that such vast historical events are a significantly different context for the use of deadly force. However, the key point is that many who write in favor of arming Christians see one context only: the fight against Evil in its many faces, in defense of the weak and of a nation simultaneously so blessed with freedom and so irresolute in the commitment to safeguarding it.

⁷⁶ Markel, *Faith and the Patriot*, 63.

⁷⁷ Markel, *Faith and the Patriot*, 17.

⁷⁸ Markel, *Faith and the Patriot*, 106.

⁷⁹ Hopkins, *A Time to Kill*, 58.

Watch-Care

Along those same lines, it is notable that while the literature of Christians and guns is frequently Biblicist, particularly in the call to defend the weak and in addressing perceived misconceptions regarding non-violence, which it sees as spurious, its theology remains largely implicit. Broadly speaking, this seems suggestive of its entanglement with the claims of civil religion, which sees the hand of Providence in founding and sustaining of the nation, but otherwise engages little with the Christian tradition in any complexity.

More seriously, well might one wonder if such a faith has any capacity to disrupt the cycles of violence that cause its faithful to arm in the first place. For example, if, as Grossman suggests, the world is made up of sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs, then redemption and transformation are fundamentally impossible. Grace, such as it is, is to be found in the fact that God has provided the sheepdogs. A measure of camaraderie found among them is perhaps the best for which one can hope.

By contrast, James McClendon argues that “Christian community is exactly one in which forgiveness not punishment is the norm”⁸⁰ He continues, “...to forgive is to learn a new and truer story about myself by discerning how fully my life is bound up even with those whose sins are sins against myself.”⁸¹ To be a disciple is to take one’s place in a community of “watch-care” in which we acknowledge that

⁸⁰ James W. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*. Revised Edition. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 227.

⁸¹ McClendon, *Ethics*, 228.

we are, indeed, one another's keepers, but in ways that go far beyond the defensive hyper-vigilance of the sheepdog.⁸²

In the last chapter, we considered the possibility that mercy and forgiveness, especially when offered to certain populations and not to others, could well diminish a community's call to build larger institutions capable of more objective, legal forms of justice. Not all acts can or should be summarily forgiven. Moreover, the call to keep one another cannot be misunderstood as a summons to ignore the needs and claims of those dependent on our care--to leave them unsafe as a protest against the need for safety, or out of a blind trust that Providence must surely work in our terms, is negligent and careless. In this respect, the gun-rights Christians have a point.

Nevertheless, McClendon's emphasis on the Christian tradition of watch-care is a reminder that to watch the world out of a hyper-vigilant care only for a few is significantly less than Scripture offers to or asks of us. To be one another's keepers is more than a sentimental call to forgive all things and somehow to be one with all people; it is, however, a challenge to get past the very objectifying gaze that carrying a gun can so perniciously teach its handler. Moreover, with so much of the gun debate in the United States focused on the right to own and carry a gun, there is far from the same robust discussion on the responsibilities that deciding to do so entails. The ongoing training necessary to assess threats is entirely a matter of personal choice. Thus, the potential for reactions of deadly force based on fear,

⁸² McClendon, *Ethics*, 51.

adrenaline, and deep-seated bias is very real. Yet watch-care pushes us to recognize that others have claims on us, perhaps even simply by dint of being human.

Alternatively, to be a citizen-protector pushes us to recognize that others want to harm us, perhaps even simply by dint of not being “one of us” in some noticeable way. Rather than learning to evaluate the claims others have with deeper subtlety, they may even remind us to ignore any search for nuance in the name of eliminating a clear and present danger. For example, recalling “The Crusader” rifle being manufactured in Florida, we might well ask if such a weapon does more than passively defend its user against violence, particularly at the hands of Islamist attackers. Rather, it seems designed to remind the user to see any and all Muslims as possible threats and, ultimately, as targets. Its symbols may, in some sense, structure the very encounter between its user and others, offering a narrative to the moment with roles and motives already assigned, and the necessary response understood. Furthermore, while such a particular weapon represents a vivid but limited extreme, it seems clear that it is less the symbolism on the gun than the gun itself that provides the structure for such encounters--and indeed, perhaps countless others.

The “Killing Rage” of the Marginalized

Even so, Womanist theologian Cheryl Kirk-Duggan would caution the Church to reject violence, but not anger, *per se*. Writing from a context disproportionately affected by systemic violence on the basis of race and gender, Kirk-Duggan is profoundly aware of the capacity for trauma to reinforce dominant cultural

messages of one's unimportance, or even non-being. Similarly, Kelly Brown Douglas notes that "America's exceptionalist identity is sustained by the construction of racialized guilt. It is a foil for the transgressions of whiteness...[A] free black body...must always be guilty of something."⁸³ For Kirk-Duggan, this guilt is further compounded by considerations of gender, which, as Brown Douglas might suggest, further serves as a foil for the transgressions of maleness. To understand oneself as beloved by God and as embodying in oneself some of the goodness of a good Creation can prove particularly challenging within such a context--to name transgressions as such can take tremendous courage and a deliberate refusal to listen to the lessons of the dominant culture. Accordingly, while Kirk-Duggan remains painfully aware of the danger of violence for those on the margins, she argues that anger has an important place in claiming one's right to justice and one's fundamental goodness in the eyes of God. Provocatively drawing on bell hooks' concept of "killing rage," Kirk-Duggan argues that

To transform denial requires "killing rage," militant resistance. Killing rage, the fury and anger that bubbles up amid an experience of violation, is painful. Without an outlet, that rage can evolve into intense grief and destruction. The locus of this rage is a place of aliveness, of immediate presence...a source for metamorphosis and empowerment.⁸⁴

For Kirk-Duggan, what is being killed is not "the enemy," or the Other, but rather the persistent dehumanization and desecration of the *imago dei* within marginalized persons, particularly as they come to be seen, not even as people, but all too easily as Evil incarnate. It is only through militant resistance to the power of internalized

⁸³ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 86.

⁸⁴ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 187.

oppression, a dismantling of the denial that acts as “a tool and process that allows us to be complicit in oppression and violence,” that human dignity can flourish. The metamorphosis she imagines is not to be confused with a restoration of one’s status—or the destruction of one’s enemies. Rather, it is to understand the goodness of one’s right to exist, not claim divine sanction for putting someone else back in their place. Indeed, Kirk-Duggan understands peace-making, not unlike Gorringer’s call to *shalom*, as undertaking the *positive* work of stewardship—seeking to celebrate and nurture “the true nobility and fragility of beauty in all of the world, in all of the people.”⁸⁵ Reminiscent also of Stalsett’s emphasis on vulnerability, she seems to imagine a community that practices protecting all that is/all who are fragile, not through some sort of process of toughening everyone up, or through arming against all dangers in a fantasy of standing one’s ground, but by working together to honor and protect the fragility in every living thing. Perhaps, then, the distinction between the “killing rage” that empowers and the rage that simply destroys is found in its relationship to violence: “killing rage” seeks to affirm the goodness of the self *despite* violence in its many forms, systemic and cultural, as well as personal. It rejects the message of violence and the ends to which violence is deployed. By contrast, the rage of privilege claims the right to express itself, if necessary, *in and through* violence. Although often obscured by psychic denial, it is willing to see violence as an acceptable means to promote the flourishing of some (the innocent and deserving) over others (criminals and other “dangerous elements” in society)--

⁸⁵ Kirk-Duggan, *Misbegotten Anguish*, 216.

others whose own aspirations to flourishing it refuses to accept, or perhaps cannot even imagine.

Conclusion: Apocalypse Without Eschaton?

Finally, James McClendon has suggested that the Christian community's faithfulness has perennially consisted, "not of conquering the world with world's weapons, but of obeying the commandments and practicing love to one another while [the community] awaited God's own time."⁸⁶ Moreover, such love is called to include one's enemies – engagement with those outside the community of faith is a central duty because our neighbors still have things to teach us, and the duty to "seek the welfare of the city" remains part of what it is to be faithful, even under conditions of oppression.⁸⁷ Quoting John Howard Yoder, he proclaims: "The divine activity of overcoming boundaries is what the New Song is all about," to which he adds: "...not by human conquest, but by the radical politics of the cross."⁸⁸

Clearly, some boundaries are important and need preserving. Yet the "radical politics of the cross" point to risky engagement across differences--not a tearing down of walls, but an invitation to others to step outside theirs as we step out of our own, and to make community on common ground. This may mean encountering some of the "killing rage" of the marginalized as they refute and reject experiences of dehumanization in which our own community of origin or we ourselves may have played a significant role. It may also mean encountering the fear and brokenness

⁸⁶ James W. McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2*. Revised Edition. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 97.

⁸⁷ On this, see McClendon, *Ethics*, 54.

⁸⁸ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 99.

that has led people to take refuge within the secure walls of a world committed to living entirely on their terms. However, the Church seeks this common ground in the hope that such work is pleasing to the God in whom, one day, all things will be made new.

Yet the well-defended people guns teach us to become are a people of boundaries, some necessary and others not. Indeed, guns may well secure for us “life on our terms,” particularly to the extent that by this, we mean a larger degree of freedom of movement throughout the world. On the other hand, they teach a measure of guardedness, especially toward the new and unfamiliar, that may well sacrifice the risk of relationship upon the altar of safety. They may well make it that much harder to assess where our deepest threats truly lie--particularly those that lie within our own walls.

Finally, guns demand a life that is not simply vigilant, but hyper-vigilant. As we have seen, many gun owners come to question whether there are any safe areas left. Many of them see the world as awash in danger, locked in a state of perpetual apocalypse from which the gun-faithful must never rest. There is no vision of a day when guns will no longer be necessary--nor even any dream of such a day. In their eyes, it is as if Creation is condemned to groan forever.⁸⁹ Bravely, they mean to be ready in the face of that groaning. But the work of dismantling the structures

⁸⁹ The continuing influence of premillennial dispensationalism, and especially its eschatology, remains significant and could be its own chapter in this study. See, for example, Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), and Max Blumenthal, *Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party*. (New York: Nation Books, 2009).

underlying so much of the world's pain, and the joy in doing so, can never be theirs to claim.

Conclusion

This study has argued that in order to understand the place of personal gun ownership in American society, it is necessary to consider three broad questions: the fundamental problem that guns are believed to “fix” (vulnerability) how they do so (instrumentality), and the persons they allow us to become (identity). Gun owners are trying to solve the larger existential problem of feeling vulnerable by introducing a particular tool that seemingly “equalizes” the power between people in a threatening encounter. Some understand this as a heroic refusal to let “Evil” win, and therefore as a fundamental expression of their religious commitment. In that light, to be armed is to prepare oneself for a life of ongoing service, and is often described as a type of religious vocation. Others use more providential language, emphasizing that “sheepdogs” are more born than made, and seeing God’s hand in placing them among the “sheep” as protectors.

Yet context matters significantly, and it is particularly important to note that those on the margins experience and interpret vulnerability differently than many in the gun community. Importantly, there is some overlap in the groups’ specific experiences of danger--what it feels like to be in the wrong place at the wrong time--and indeed, that being the case, members of some marginalized groups have advocated personal handgun ownership. Even so, they remain more reluctant to see this as truly “equalizing” the issues of power underlying any given encounter, and in this respect, it could be argued that their use of handguns is actually more narrowly instrumental, a particular tool for a certain kind of contingency, in ways that

dominant communities are eager to claim but cannot entirely justify. Gun ownership among the marginalized also remains notably more rare.

Moreover, the distinction in social location reveals a slippery slope for gun owners from dominant communities that they themselves find hard to see and rarely appear to acknowledge: that guns reinforce their sense of ontological security, not only in some supposedly “neutral” way as individuals, but *as members of dominant groups*. Few seem to recognize, much less admit, that guns do not function merely as benign instruments of security; guns also operate as tools of domination that help define locally who belongs and who does not, where one is free to go and where one is not, and even how one is to conduct oneself in public spaces. Thus, while guns can and do have a role in stopping violence, they also perpetuate larger and more subtle forms of violence, and a narrow “rescue” here or there does not change the overall dynamic of injustice that underlies much of that violence. As we have seen, the lure of *securitas*, a dream of invulnerability, diminishes human community and offers a false promise of escape from the human condition itself. That does not mean that guns never achieve their stated purpose -- to make a situation safer -- in any circumstances. They do. But such circumstances cannot be understood narrowly and lifted up as unambiguous victories for “good” people. They are not. They are also incapable of offering the invulnerability for which some look to them in hope.

Perhaps it is this underlying hope that animates the vociferous defense mounted by gun owners and advocates on behalf of their “right to bear arms.” It is, poignantly in some respects, an expression of the “will to believe.” Yet, if so, it is a

particularly constricted expression of belief. The National Rifle Association and other groups have organized actively throughout the United States to assert this right at every level of government, from the most modest and informal town hall meeting to the Supreme Court. Yet notably, many gun owners appear to focus narrowly on their right to have their chosen weapon by their side whenever and wherever they choose, but seem to have relatively little interest in the responsibilities this entails.

These responsibilities can be understood in two ways. First, as a duty of care honored in active steps to reduce unintended harm -- for example, in narrowly practical terms, through safe storage of one's firearms and in ongoing, active training in its proper use, recognizing that in any given situation when a gun is drawn, the circumstances can change instantaneously, and the legal and moral burdens can shift. An intruder can become a victim as different factors emerge, changing the context. This is common, and professionals such as police officers require ongoing training and assessment to prepare for such scenarios. Unfortunately, few private individuals make that same commitment.

Second, even fewer seem to acknowledge the broader cycles of violence of which guns, generally, form such an obvious part. The fact that any given gun owner believes that his or her particular guns are "not to blame" for violence seems all too thin. Tragic misuses are labeled "accidents," seemingly forgetting that guns have a lethal power that one's conscious intentions cannot wholly control. There is no significant conversation around accountability within the gun community. Perhaps also, to claim responsibility would prove too legally and emotionally costly--too

much of a challenge to the fantasy of *securitas*. Even in cases of domestic violence, the role of guns is all too often explained away, and their contribution to a broader atmosphere of intimidation throughout the home is scarcely acknowledged at all by gun owners. When it is, the woman of the house is advised to go get a gun of her own as a strategy of deterrence. Too many gun owners seem to confuse peace-making with pacification of one's immediate environment alone.

That said, those opposed to guns do not always seem to take the vulnerability of gun owners seriously. As we have argued, in some cases, this may reflect a level of privilege that insulates them from certain kinds of unsafe environments. But whatever the reason, in the eyes of some, the fact that people feel unsafe, both for themselves and for their dependents, simply does not justify owning or carrying a gun in *any* circumstances. Such opposition to guns can be so focused on the broader cycles of violence that, for example, the anxiety of a woman crossing an empty parking lot alone at night does not seem to move them. Ironically, in demonizing guns so unreservedly, they can at times sound just as obsessed with Evil incarnate as the most militant Christian gun enthusiast, with the obvious difference that for those opposed to guns, it is the gun itself that is the Evil to be overcome. Perhaps the dream of a world without guns can present its own fantasy of *securitas*.

Along those lines, it is interesting to note that the language of gun opponents can also tend to rely on the language of "rights" quite heavily. Many reject the notion of a right to carry a personal handgun, or counter that someone's right to carry a gun must not be allowed to infringe on someone else's right to feel safe by knowing that they are in a "gun-free environment." But if we challenge gun owners

to articulate their decision to own a gun in terms of responsibilities as well as rights, we might well ask what responsibilities those who do not own guns are prepared to acknowledge, for their part. For if it is immoral to carry a gun, can it be assumed that *not* to do so is, therefore, inherently *moral*? Or does morality demand a more positive contribution to safety that each person should be expected to make? For Christians, the call to be our brother's keeper surely extends beyond the immediate task of taking the gun from his hand. To truly "keep" one another is to practice purposeful "watch care" that works to diminish fear for all. In that light, rather than focusing on the ready supply of guns alone, perhaps gun opponents need to consider more carefully where the demand comes from, and need to take more meaningful steps to dismantle it. Put another way, their duty of care is not merely "to rid the world of guns," if that were even immediately possible, but to show solidarity both with victims of gun violence, and also with those who would have guns, remembering them as sisters and brothers all.

This study has further attempted to make the case that theology is central to any analysis of the gun debate in American society. This is clearest in justifications of and responses to the role of guns in the lives of American Christians. Within different Christian communities, as we have seen, perspectives on guns can reflect beliefs on theological anthropology, the doctrine of Providence, the nature of God, vocation, and Jesus' call to care for "the least of these." We have also seen an example of guns as tools for mission in ways that touch on ecclesiology--many others might have been included.

However, it would be a mistake to limit any account of the theological implications of gun ownership to Christian communities alone. Rather, this study has tried to offer a larger Christian analysis of the particular practice of owning a gun, both in and outside of Christian circles. It has seen that practice as reflecting and claiming allegiance to forms of identity and meaning through which gun owners make sense of what they are doing and even of who they are. What is striking is how quickly participation in gun culture is understood in terms of ultimate concern, which guns either defend or to which, for some, they may well offer access. The promise of “regeneration through violence” and the close connection of guns to the practice of American civil religion seem to point to such possibilities for self-transcendence.

Notably, the perspectives from those on the margins have all tried to challenge that ultimacy and to find in Scripture and tradition the resources capable of naming and resisting a false God worshiped through violence. They have argued for a Christian faith committed to the liberation of all people and reflective of the freedom that lies close to God’s own heart. This identifies the freedom and security offered by guns as all too partial at best, and all too often, as simply false. Moreover, it looks to its own history of resilience and emancipation as a reminder that cycles of oppression and the violence that sustains those cycles can be interrupted and significantly challenged, even as the project of their full dismantling continues. This is grounds for hope.

This study concludes with the further hope that those who seek to follow Jesus will come to recognize security alone as a temptation to be overcome rather

than a goal to be sought, and the fullness of identity to be found in him as one that builds bridges rather than walls.

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