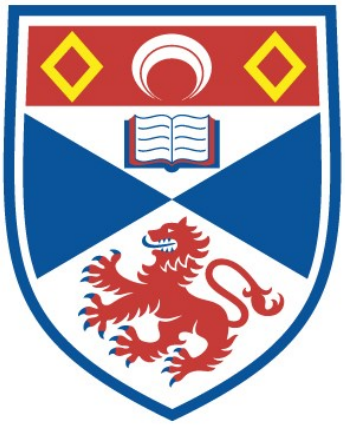
“GUNS AND THE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL STUDY”

Richard Maxwell Grant

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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"Guns and the American Christian: A Practical Theological Study"

Richard Maxwell Grant

University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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Abstract

This dissertation is a practical theological study of American Christian gun owners. It seeks to answer the question "How do American Christian gun owners understand their gun practices theologically?" It argues that they do so in a range of ways, and that their practices are a complex blend of faith, culture, and experience. That blend both shapes their theologies and comes to be shaped by those theologies. Its central contribution is its close attention to how American Christian gun owners talk about guns and faith and in its clear demonstration that the two are closely related for many. It establishes this through a series of focus groups and individual interviews with Christian gun owners that were conducted for this study from various locations across the United States, with a particular emphasis on the similarities and differences between white and Black gun owners. The study places modern gun violence and gun ownership in historical and sociological perspective, compares denominational, academic, and popular theologies of guns, and concludes with a critical analysis of how Christian gun ownership might be better understood, particularly in theological terms. Building on the work of John Reader and others, this study argues that gun ownership is highly concerned with "comfort zones," which need to be conceived as physical, emotional, cultural and theological spaces.

Acknowledgments

It is a great joy to acknowledge the insight and support of many others throughout the process of this research.

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I also benefited greatly from the chance to present an early version of this thesis at the Center for the Study of Religion and Politics, under the direction of Professor Mario Aguilar at the University of St. Andrews. The questions and encouragement were invaluable, particularly as I tried to ponder what would emerge in Chapter Five.

As a working church pastor, I owe much to those who generously took care of any number of things because "Max is…busy," especially Gloria LaDestro, Laurie Meek, Alexander Constantine, Jenny Byxbee, Rev. Shawn Garan, Pam Ferrell, Julie Muratore, not to mention Steve Scroggins, Yves Jean, Barbara Zappavigna, Christopher Starr and Robert Willett. I look forward to taking back up more of the load.

For Dr. Ching-chu Hu, who has been calling me to conscience since 1990, Dr. David Greene, who has been calling me into theology since 2000, and Dr. Kendall Atterbury, who

has been calling me to get back to work since 2012, thank you for always speaking the truth in love. I heard both.

Closer to home, I am grateful for the support of my parents, Richard D. and Jane Grant, who thought it could be good for *me*…and good for the rest of my family if I had a project to complete. They know me well and have supported me since the get-go. Now may we all turn to a new era of accomplishments, to the attendant fees of the next generation of family scholars, and to more time together.

Closest, there are my children, Grace and Emily, who have been thinking about guns and politics since they were tiny, and who seem to have become remarkable young women while I was busy in the front room reading, annotating, zooming, and writing. Mom and I are so proud of you.

To Oliver and Maggie, my companions early and late, on days when the words flowed easily and on those other days when the words did not, thank you. There will be many more proper walks.

And finally, there is my wife, Liz. Between my running a church, with its sermons and visits and leaking roofs, my seeking a Master of Letters and then a Ph.D….in Scotland, and my persistent refusal to count chickens prior to their hatching, I have asked a great deal. Moreover, I was far from the only one asking. These years also demanded attending to the logistics of small, then medium, children; parents; navigating a global pandemic; and her own considerable obligations (including, to review, serving in local office, running a school, and mentoring the next generation of teachers). Yet with all of it, Liz, you have not only endured: you have shone. I have not deserved your patience, much less your enthusiasm, for this work. It is for you.

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Introduction

Central Research Question, Thesis, and Contribution to Scholarship

This dissertation seeks to answer the following question: how do American Christian gun owners understand their gun practices *theologically*? Its central thesis is that they do so by a range of ways, and that by excavating the ordinary theology of American Christian gun owners, it becomes clear that those practices are a complex blend of faith, culture and experience that both shape their theologies and are shaped by those theologies. Drawing on the work of John Reader, I will further argue that theirs is a form of "blurred encounter," in which gun owners seek to make theological sense of the limits of their comfort zones and to reframe their worldviews in light of new experiences.

The dissertation's contribution to scholarship is its close attention to how Christian gun owners talk about faith and guns, and in its clear demonstration that the two are closely related for many. In this, it addresses two gaps in the relevant academic literatures: sociologically, there has been a broad correlation between American gun ownership and Evangelical religious affiliation, but no exploration at the level of individual beliefs; theologically, it explores carrying firearms as something many Christians do, not only in general, but specifically *as Christians*. While more work is needed in these areas, this study begins to fill those gaps.

It is also original in attending to those gaps as a task of practical theology, which is to say, by engaging with believers themselves and seeking to listen carefully to how they describe their commitments and values, rather than, say, starting with doctrine or Scripture and asking what a proper perspective on guns ought to be for Christians in general. The ways in which it undertakes that engagement from among many possible and potentially fruitful methods will be explained further below and in Chapter One (see pages 25-37). For now, this study begins with a particular interest in practices and understands theology to be embodied in and flowing from those practices.

Key Interlocutors

The dissertation's central interlocutors are the practical theologian John Reader and the missiologist Andrew Walls, whose concepts of "blurred encounter" and "inculturation," respectively, will particularly inform the discussion in the final chapter, when I attempt to place the voices of individual Christian gun owners in critical perspective. Methodologically, it engages closely with Thomas Groome's process of "shared *praxis*," Jeff Astley's attention to "ordinary theology," Elaine Graham's focus on practice, and Eric Stoddart's work on the theological implications of "social sorting." It also draws on the sociological scholarship of David Yamane, and specifically on his concept of a "culture of armed citizenship," as well as the theological ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr, David Hollenbach, S.J., Traci West, M. Shawn Copeland, and Kelly Brown Douglas—although how it does so merits particular explanation (see below).

Methodology

Methodologically, this study is grounded in a process of *shared praxis* as first articulated by Thomas Groome. A fuller justification for this method appears in Chapter One, alongside an explanation of Jeff Astley's "ordinary theology," which was also central. In concrete terms, that means a series of five focus groups and a pilot group, conducted either in-person or online, and engaging a total of 24 Christian gun owners. 14 were men, 10 were women; 12 were white, 12 were Black. All but two were Protestant, and all but three were "ordinary theologians," which is to say, people without formal theological training. Participants were in the Southeast or Southwest, Northeast or the Upper Midwest; one participant was currently located in the West but had known other members in his focus group while living in the Southeast (a table of participants and their connections is in Chapter Four). For reasons that will be explained further in Chapter Four, initially select participants were invited to expand on their views in post-focus group interviews; however later in the project, more extended "pre-interviews" were completed prior to the focus groups. In a few cases, participants completed pre-interviews but were not able to join a focus group. All interviews and focus groups were subsequently anonymized and developed into transcripts, which I then analyzed. Further following the broad contours of

a *shared praxis* model, the dissertation anticipates these interviews by placing gun ownership and gun violence in current demographic perspective, historical and sociological context, and then theological context. It concludes with a chapter that seeks to bring these different strands together. (A more detailed synopsis of the chapters is below.)

At the outset, I want to clarify the role of theological ethics in this project as I understand it. It will be immediately apparent that several key interlocutors stand in the broad tradition of Christian Ethics. However, this dissertation is not attempting to find its own place in that tradition. As we will describe in Chapter One (see 27-ff), its interest is in a broader web of experience and identity, rather than on particular decisions or norms, and their propriety. Of course, norms offer one important way in which identities are enacted and, to that extent, cannot help but appear in what follows. But this project is not finally seeking different or better norms, as such. Instead, it draws on the frameworks they propose as forms of scaffolding upon which how gun practices become theology and vice-versa might be made visible, an analysis we will undertake in Chapter Five. The specific role of ethics in this study is to help bring into focus what participants say and some of what they do not, in all its untidiness. Speaking of what we value most implies a great deal about what we value either less or not at all, and much of what we take as given might well be otherwise. I will explore this further in the next chapter when I distinguish Practical Theology's perspective on practices from how Christian Ethics emphasizes decisions (see pages 26-28).

Synopsis of Chapters

In the next five chapters, I will attempt to describe how American Christian gun owners understand their own practices, and particularly how they do so as Christians. To bring that into perspective, in Chapter One I will give a statistical portrait of U.S. gun ownership and gun violence, focusing on trends in the last decade (up to October 2022). This will then lead to an initial exploration of guns as an "issue" that Christians and Christian institutions have taken up in various ways, before it shifts into an extended discussion of Practical Theology and of the specific methodologies by which this dissertation is seeking to take up the subject of Christian gun ownership. I have opted for

this approach because it clarifies some of the ways in which guns become a problem with which churches and believers must grapple, and then explains why shared praxis and ordinary theology offer important strategies (among others) to study how believers are doing that grappling.

In Chapter Two I will expand on the statistical portrait of gun violence and will give a brief historical overview of the emergence of American "gun culture." I will then highlight key sociological studies of American gun owners, which will speak to who buys guns and the meanings they find in doing so. It will also be clear that such studies, while excellent overall, do not seek to explore religious meaning in any detail, settling instead for basic matters of denominational affiliation.

In Chapter Three, I explore denominational statements about guns over a span of approximately 40 years, with particular emphasis on those drafted since the shootings at Columbine High School (1999), when the era of mass shootings and school violence has been thought to have begun. These statements will be seen to have particular sets of assumptions, to have been developed by and addressed to particular audiences. I will also give a short introduction to some "pro-gun" theology as published in formal academic contexts or as resources from one Christian gun owner to others. My selections here are not intended to be comprehensive—identification and analysis of such resources could likely be a dissertation in its own right. If nothing else, they will give an impression of where some Christian gun owners perceive the need for resources. How they fill a given hole may be less interesting than a sense of the hole they hope to fill. Lastly for this chapter, I will engage with academic theology and (briefly) ethics in order to provide a robust language with which to understand how the Christian gun owners in this study speak (and do not speak) about their practices, what they understand to be at stake in them, and why.

Then in Chapter Four, we will hear from the Christian gun owners I interviewed for this study, in what I hope will be enough detail to capture both what and how they think, as well as how they express themselves. This chapter is the heart of my project and likely its deepest contribution.

In Chapter Five, I will reflect theologically on what the participants have said and will attempt to put the chapters in dialogue with one another, bringing in Reader's concept

of "blurred encounter" to describe a person's "comfort zone" as emotional, sociological, and theological all at once.

Finally, the Conclusion will offer some observations about gun ownership and how Christian institutions might engage it more thoughtfully, as well as some possible roads for future scholarship to pursue. It will also emphasize the profoundly reciprocal influence that gun practices can have on the theology of Christian gun owners, sometimes to chasten and at others to embolden them in powerful ways.

A Word on My Background

The seeds of dissertation were planted in Newtown, Connecticut, USA on December 14, 2012.

On that day, a shooter entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School, killing 20 students (in grades 1 and 2), six teachers and himself.

It was a national tragedy that happened in Newtown, Connecticut, about 55 miles—a little less than an hour by car—from where I live with my wife (also a teacher) and our two girls, who at that time were four years old and one year old, respectively. To me, the tragedy seemed to come out of nowhere.

That was largely a reflection of where I had come from.

Although both my wife and I both grew up in New York City in the 1970s and 80's, we had no personal experience with guns. Since 2007 a mainline Christian pastor in progressive denomination (United Church of Christ). I now serve an affluent, majority white suburban church just outside of New York City. Guns have not been a part of my experience or ostensibly, of my culture. I knew veterans; I knew a few hunters. That was it. As a result, the Sandy Hook tragedy was shocking: this was something that happened…somewhere else. As I would come to understand, this was largely thanks to levels of protection I scarcely saw and to the careful practices of navigating spaces into which I had been raised. Others had profoundly different experiences.

However, I did attend an emergency denominational meeting in Newtown on the Monday after that horrible Friday. To drive into this small town was surreal, just three days later. On a busy Monday just before Christmas, the shops were empty and the streets

devoid of traffic. From the perspective of eight years later, it was like driving through a small town in April 2020, in the midst of the initial COVID quarantine. The first two of the funerals were to take place later that morning. And it was at this moment that we gathered as nearby clergy, with some notion of "helping." It quickly became apparent that the most helpful assistance we could offer was in supporting the professionals who were descending on the town from organizations like Presbyterian Disaster Relief, the Red Cross, and others. This was arranged.

However, in returning to my congregation, it was clear that this did not feel like it was "enough" to many, who seemed to be looking for "a way to make a difference" that was, probably not so deep down, surely about their own comfort as much as it was a gesture of succor and solidarity in the face of tragedy. Then later that week, the Governor requested that churches across the state ring their bells in memory of the dead. This prompted a question: how many peals were we to ring? Were we ringing in memory of the children and the teachers who lost their lives? What about the shooter's mother, who was his first victim in the hours before his arrival at Sandy Hook Elementary School? What about the shooter himself, a mentally ill young man, a child of an acrimonious divorce who had few friends and was, it emerged, neurologically atypical—was he also a victim to be mourned? The decision was essentially mine and the sexton's, with me deciding how many peals to request and him to do the pealing. We were alone in the church. Yet I suddenly felt the weight of my own privilege, my lack of experience with violence, and the strong likelihood that any decision I might make according to any logic I might offer would likely be repeated—and parsed—by any number of people in the congregation. This shaped the theology-on-the-fly that I was seeking to do and made "my" decision a far more complicated statement, all of it silent and expressed in a hesitation that lasted only a second or two.

We rang twenty-six bells.

I think, on balance, that was probably where our church community would have landed had we discussed it at a meeting and then voted.

But pondering it later, I wondered how many peals the churches of Newtown would ring, if any, and where the lines, geographical and otherwise, would fall between those who were ringing their bells and those who were not—the congregations for whom this did not

feel like a tragedy that had happened to "us." Who would decide? And among those of us who were ringing, what did such "solidarity" mean? As I look back on that ten years later, perhaps it was then that I first started to become a practical theologian who pondered guns.

I decided to see if there were Christian gun owners who might be willing to speak to me, and this project began, initially as an M.Litt. and then in its current form as a Ph.D. at University of St Andrews. The short answer to that question is "yes…eventually." Identifying participants could feel "feast or famine" at times, with many closed doors and reluctant yeses that ended up petering out, and then other occasions when someone would decide to vouch for me and several people would then agree to participate in a single afternoon. What I learned was that, when people did agree to speak to me, they were willing to speak in great depth. When these interviews began, based on the voices I read in my initial M.Litt. study, I was expecting to hear a great deal about Christian nationalism, Second Amendment rights as "God-given," family values, etc. What I actually heard was far more varied, thoughtful, complicated, and often moving. I met many people I would be glad to have as my own neighbors, although we differ in many ways, and not just with regard to owning and carrying guns. A few have even made a point of calling me since their interview just to see how my project was faring. I will always be grateful for all those who decided to participate. My hope is that others will learn as much from them as I have.

Chapter One
Defining A Problem and The Aims of this Study

Introduction

As an initial orientation for the reader, this chapter will offer a general portrait of recent gun violence in the United States in order to situate more clearly why many consider it a "problem." Just what kind of problem and for whom will be shown to have a range of possible answers. From there, I will suggest some ways in which gun violence is formulated as a problem for churches, with some attention to ways in which faithful reflection is happening about gun violence and, relatedly, about how Christians seek to understand the proper place of guns in American society. I will also propose that while such reflection is nearly always thoughtful and frequently compelling, it is unclear how closely it aligns with the beliefs of individual Christians—and particularly with the beliefs of American Christian gun owners. In Chapter Four, I ask them to describe their practices as gun owners and to reflect on those practices Biblically and theologically. That focus on practices is significant and aligns this research squarely in the tradition of Practical Theology. In anticipation of that discussion, in this chapter, I will describe what I understand a "Practical Theology" approach to mean. As I have noted in the Introduction, within that broad tradition, I follow a revised version of Thomas Groome's model of "shared praxis" and draw on Jeff Astley's description of "ordinary theology," which I describe below in more detail. I will also argue for the relative benefits of that approach in contrast to other familiar possible approaches.

Gun Violence as an American Crisis

According to the BBC, "[t]here were 1.5 million civilian firearms deaths between 1968 and 2017, [a number] higher than the number of American soldiers killed in every US conflict since the American War for Independence in 1775." The journal *Nature* puts the number slightly smaller, at 1.4 million gun deaths, but notes that "about 40% of the world's

civilian-owned firearms are in the United States."[1] "In 2020 alone, more than 45,000 Americans died at the end of a barrel of a gun, whether by homicide or suicide, more than any year on record. The figure represents a 25% increase from the five years prior, and a 43% increase from 2010." According to the 2018 Small Arms Survey, also reported by the BBC, the US reports a ration of 120.5 firearms per 100 residents – an increased share since 2011, and which far surpasses that of any other country (the second is Yemen, with 52.8 firearms per 100, followed by Serbia and Montenegro, which are both 39.1 per 100 residents). In 2020, gun related killings in the US represented 79% of all homicides, as compared to 37% in Canada, 13% in Australia, and 4% in the UK.[2]

The website *Politico.eu* notes that "while death rates involving firearms are even higher in South American countries, the U.S. stands out, not only compared to other high-income countries when it comes to the number of deaths involving firearms but also with hardly any license requirements to own a gun." In fact, *Politico.eu* identifies only three other nations that are substantively without restrictions on privately owing firearms: Switzerland, for which some (but not all) guns can be owned without a license; Ethiopia, which makes only an exception for those "disqualified or underage"; and Yemen, which, like the United States, extends the right to own and carry a gun to "non-prohibited persons of legal age."[3]

Another strong point of contrast between the United States and other countries has been the power of gun related tragedies to spur immediate changes in licensing or other forms of regulation, including significant prohibition of private gun ownership. A study by the Council on Foreign Relations compares the United States to Canada, Australia, Israel, the United Kingdom, Norway and Japan, countries it describes as "wealthy democratic peers," but which have "instituted tighter restrictions to curb gun violence." For example, it describes how Canada, which ranks fifth globally in gun ownership, has low rates of gun

[1] Lynne Peeples, "US Gun Policies: What Research Says about Their Effectiveness." *Nature*, Vol 607, 21 July 2022, 434. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01791-z. Accessed 31 October 2022.
[2] BBC.com, no author listed, "Mass Shootings: America's challenge for gun control explained in seven charts." 12 October 2022. https://bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081. Accessed 31 October 2022.
[3] Giovanna Coi and Cornelius Hirsch, "Global Gun Violence and Laws Compared—By the Numbers," *Politico.eu* (May 25, 2022). https://www.politico.eu/article/global-gun-violence-and-laws-compared-by-the-numbers/. Accessed 3 November 2022.

violence. Restrictions which would be seemingly unthinkable in the U.S., such as a 28-day waiting period for gun purchases, mandatory safety training classes, detailed background checks, bans and restrictions on military style firearms and ammunition, have all been in place since a 1989 mass shooting at an engineering school in Montreal. While some restrictions were eased in 2012, a 2017 shooting at a Quebec City mosque reinstated and extended many of the same restrictions. In Australia, a 1996 mass shooting in Port Arthur, resulting in 35 deaths and nearly as many injuries, resulted in a significant revision of national gun laws, including mandated licensing and registration, a national buy-back program that collected over 650,000 guns (estimated to be about one-sixth of the national stock), and other reforms. These significant legislative reforms were passed less than two weeks after the shooting. In the UK and Norway, events such the 1987 Hungerford Massacre and the 1996 school shooting in Dunblane, and the 2011 shootings in Oslo and at a summer camp, respectively, led to tighter restrictions, particularly in the wake of public outcry. By contrast, in Japan, gun and sword restrictions date back to the 16th century, but took modern form in 1958, such that, according to the report,

> the only guns permitted are shotguns, air guns, guns with specific research or industrial purposes, or those used for competitions. However, before access to these specialty weapons is granted, one must obtain formal instruction and pass a battery of written, mental, and drug tests and a rigorous background check.[4]

Perhaps with such discrepancies in policy and public opinion in mind, international opinion can be quite severe, particularly in the face of mass shootings. For example, after the school shootings in Uvalde, Texas on May 24, 2022, an editorial in *Le Monde* said, "America is killing itself….The defence of the second amendment, in its absolutist sense, is now a quasi-sacred duty, escaping all questioning. Always more weapons: that is Republicans' only credo." As reported in *The Guardian*,

> *NRC Handelsblad* [from the Netherlands] made much the same points. It has become, the paper said, 'a ritual, to which America is more accustomed than any other nation': a governor urging togetherness, a president quoting the Bible,

[4] Jonathan Masters, "US Gun Policy: Global Comparisons" Council on Foreign Relations (June 10, 2022). https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-gun-policy-global-comparisons. Accessed 3 November 2022.

politicians accusing each other of politicizing, 'and the countdown to the one begins.'[5]

In addition to responses by Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, *The Guardian* quoted the "equally weary" response of Spain's *El Pais*, which said, "Mass shootings are such an essential part of US life they have their own rules....[and each one prompts] an artificial reopening of the debate on gun control." As a commentator for Danish public radio DR observed, "Only in the US…does a seven-year-old attend school to learn about school shootings. Only in the US do children who only just learned to ride a bike have to practise hiding under school desks in case a bad man with a gun comes."[6] An article in the *Times of India* quoted American documentary filmmaker Michael Moore, who said, "there's something in the American psyche, it's almost this kind of right or privilege, this sense of entitlement, to resolve our conflicts with violence…My question is, why do we believe that way, and other cultures don't?"[7]

Guns as a Problem

International outcry appears particularly attuned to situations of mass shootings (technically defined as gun violence against four or more people), such as the school shootings as Columbine High School (1999), Sandy Hook Elementary School (2012), or Uvalde Elementary School (2022); shootings at houses of worship such as Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston, SC (2015), First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, TX (2017), Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA (2018), or, relatedly, targeting local Muslims in Chapel Hill, NC (2015); the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL (2016); or Las Vegas (2017).

However, such events, while shocking and newsworthy, account for approximately 1% of the deaths and casualties related to US gun violence every year. Thus, the Gun

[5] This quotation and the following two are from Jon Henley, "America is Killing Itself': world reacts with horror and incomprehension to Texas shooting." *Guardian Online* (25 May 2022). https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/25/international-reaction-texas-school-shooting. Accessed 3 November 2022.
[6] Jon Henley, "America is Killing Itself" *Guardian Online* (25 May 2022).
[7] Prabash K Dutta, "Why guns are American 'culture' and shootings an epidemic," *Times of India* (online) 25 May 2022. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/why-guns-are-american-culture-and-shootings-an-epidemic/articleshow/91794186.cms. Accessed 1 November 2022.

Violence Archive, which documents and updates US gun-related incidents in real time, verifies 36,660 gun violence deaths to date in 2022; 16,794 homicides; 19,866 suicides; 563 mass shootings; 976 defensive uses; and 1,308 unintentional shootings—numbers that are generally typical of the data since 2014.[8] It is here that the wide availability of guns can be correlated to casualties (injuries are also recorded and are broadly comparable to suicide rates by gun, if a bit lower). With that in mind, Amnesty International has declared US gun violence a "human rights crisis." Similarly, David Hemenway at the Harvard School of Public Health and Director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center and Youth Violence Prevention Center, has described it as a national public health crisis.[9]

In addition, gun purchases appear to have accelerated during the pandemic. A study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* noted as follows:

> An estimated 2.9% of U.S. adults (7.5 million) became new gun owners from 1 January 2019 to 26 April 2021. Most (5.4 million) had lived in homes without guns, collectively exposing, in addition to themselves, over 11 million persons to household firearms, including more than 5 million children. Approximately half of all new gun owners were female (50% in 2019 and 47% in 2020 to 2021), 20% were Black (21% in 2019 and in 2020–2021), and 20% were Hispanic (20% in 2019 and 19% in 2020–2021). By contrast, other recent purchasers who were not new gun owners were predominantly male (70%) and White (74%), as were gun owners overall (63% male, 73% White).[10]

Similarly, the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence observes, "overall, Americans purchased an estimated 22 million guns in 2020—an increase of nearly 65% over the

[8] Gun Violence Archive (October 28, 2022). https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/. Accessed 28 October 2022. It should be noted that suicides are typically far larger in any given year—often nearly twice the number of "willful, malicious, accidental deaths."

[9] [No author listed] "Amnesty International report declares gun violence in the United States to be a human rights crisis." (September 12, 2018). https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2018/09/gun-violence-human-rights-crisis/ Accessed 3 November 2022; David Hemenway, *Private Guns, Public Health*. (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2004). With regard to public health approaches, the lobby and research group Everytown for Gun Safety notes: "75% of homicides—which cluster in cities—involve guns, and the majority affect young Black and Latino men living in historically underfunded neighborhoods. Just 4% of blocks account for 50% of crime in many cities, and only 2-3 individuals from each street group actively engage in shootings. Comprehensive solutions to gun violence must recognize the role of social contagion and local context in cities, and supplement policies with community and data-driven violence intervention initiatives." See "City Gun Violence" Everytown.org. https://everytownresearch.org/issue/city-gun-violence. Accessed 8 November 2022.

[10] Matthew Miller, Wilson Zhang and Deborah Azrael, "Firearm Purchasing During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results From the 2021 National Firearms Survey," in *Annals of Internal Medicine* 2021 Dec 21: M21-3423. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8697522/ Accessed 31 October 2022.

previous year's gun sales—and gun sales remained higher than average in 2021."[11] According to a study from the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers University,

> we focused on those who purchased firearms during a time of substantial stress with the COVID-19 pandemic, a contentious election and a large racial justice movement following the death of George Floyd.…People who are sensitive to threats such as these and who have difficulties with impulse control are buying firearms at a greater rate during this unprecedented time…Even though we know that firearms access increases the risk for a host of dangerous outcomes, it may be that purchasing firearms provided these individuals with a sense of safety and control.[12]

Black gun owners

According to a National Sports Shooting Federation study quoted in the *Guardian*, Black gun owners represented the single highest demographic group of new gun owners in 2020. As the *Guardian* reports, "Black Americans have a multitude of reasons for buying a gun – some new gun owners told the *Guardian* about stress related to the pandemic, others about the anxiety of seeing scores of armed white protesters rallying against lockdown orders or the election results." For example, one 46 year-old business owner interviewed described himself as having been supportive of California's strict gun laws until 2020. "But then the intense focus on entrenched racism in policing led him to conclude that 'some law enforcement and some extremist groups are one in the same…[I]f buying firearms is the route we have to take to make sure that things don't get too shady over my tail light, then so be it."[13] Similarly, the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA), founded in

[11]Kelly Drane, "Surging Gun Violence: Where We Are, How We Got Here, and Where We Go Next," Report of the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 4 May 2022. https://giffords.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/22.05-GLC_Rise-in-Gun-Violence_Executive-Summary_FINAL.pdf. Accessed 31 October 2022. See also Richard Rosenfeld and Ernesto Lopez, "Pandemic, Social Unrest, and Crime in U.S. Cities: Year-End 2021 Update," Council on Criminal Justice, January 2022, https://councilоncj.org/crime-trends-yearend-2021-update/; Dae-Young Kim and Scott W. Phillips, "When COVID-19 and Guns Meet: A Rise in Shootings," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 73 (2021); Priya Krishnakumar, Emma Tucker, Ryan Young, and Pamela Kirkland, "Fueled by Gun Violence, Cities Across the US Are Breaking All-time Homicide Records This Year," *CNN*, December 12, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/us/homicides-major-cities-increase-end-of-year-2021/index.html.

[12] Taylor R. Rodriguez, as quoted in Patrice Harley, "Who Bought Firearms During 2020 Purchasing Surge?" *Rutgers News* (November 15, 2021). https://www.rutgers.edu/news/who-bought-firearms-during-2020-purchasing-surge. Accessed 28 October 2022.

[13] Abene Clayton, "Black Americans Flock to Gun Stores and Clubs: 'I needed to protect myself'" in *The Guardian* online (5 April 2021). https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/05/us-gun-ownership-black-americans-surge?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other. Accessed 8 November 2022.

2015, "has about 48,000 members and 120 chapters across the US…up from 30,000 and 75 chapters in 2019" according to *Bloomberg.com*. Citing another National Sports Shooting Federation demographic study, *Bloomberg.com* notes that 87% of gun sellers reported an increase in Black women purchasers for the first half of 2021. As one Southern California gun shop owner (also a Black woman) noted, the number of Black women purchasing firearms and seeking training has risen dramatically. "Courses that used to draw three or four people a day have ballooned to 30," she noted. In fact, she said, "I had to revamp the program to instruct the other teachers on how to deal with women."[14]

But while the sharp upward trend in Black gun purchasing is new, the relationship between race and gun violence is not. According to Everytown for Gun Safety: "Black Americans are disproportionately impacted by gun violence. They experience 10 times the gun homicides, 18 times the gun assault injuries, and nearly three times the fatal police shootings of white Americans."[15] A 2021 study, also by Everytown for Gun Safety, highlights the significant "community trauma" of persistent gun violence, arguing that it is

> not only the sum of the hurt and suffering of individuals who have had traumatizing experiences. It is also a collective trauma experienced in communities with elevated levels of violence…that many in Black communities know to be ever-present and deeply problematic.[16]

To illustrate the scope of the problem, it goes on to note that a Black American is shot and wounded by a gun every 11 minutes.

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[14] Fola Akinnibi, "Black Women Represent Growing Share of US Gun Owners," *Bloomberg.com* (October 6, 2022). https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-06/black-women-represent-growing-group-of-new-us-gun-ownership. Accessed 8 November 2022.

[15] Everytown For Gun Safety, "Impact of Gun Violence on Black Americans" Everytownresearch.org. https://everytownresearch.org/issue/gun-violence-black-americans/. Accessed 8 November 2022.

[16] Everytown For Gun Safety Report: "Invisible Wounds: Gun Violence and Community Trauma Among Black Americans" (May 27, 2021). Everytownresearch.org. https://everytownresearch.org/report/invisible-wounds-gun-violence-and-community-trauma-among-black-americans/. Accessed 8 November 2022. This study further notes that a young Black man is 21 times more likely to be shot and killed by police than his white counterpart. ("Invisible Wounds," 24). Additionally, a young Black male dies by gun homicide every three hours in the United States. ("Invisible Wounds," 20).

Guns and Their Violence as a Problem *For* Christians

However one defines "gun problems" and whose problems they are, American Christians are affected by them. Churches are directly involved in pastoral care and liturgical support for victims of gun violence and for their families, in ways that engage the services of ordained clergy but also the membership at large. Obvious examples are through prayer, attendance at memorial services, making food, writing notes, visiting hospitals or accompanying others during court proceedings. Young people who lose friends or parents to homicide might receive care from a church for years to come, including prayer for healing, financial support, mentoring and an adult presence of "being taken under someone's wing," collective remembering of the lost on important occasions, or paths toward wider community engagement, just to name a few. All of these are possible expressions of the church's ministries of care. James Atwood calls churches to recognize the full impact of gun violence by recognizing that the "collateral damage" of any given incident can be quite broad:

> Whenever there is a mass shooting in the United States, those who die get the headlines. But the family members, friends, and acquaintances left behind are the long-term victims…For the rest of their lives, survivors must deal with broken hearts. The deceased had parents, siblings, children, cousins, and aunts and uncles and grandparents who loved them. There are friends and business colleagues, church friends, neighbors, and the crew who met for bowling every Thursday night. Their lives will never be the same…Each victim was a valued member of a community.[17]

Similarly, Amnesty International warns that "on average, more than 317 people are shot every day and survive – at least long enough to get to a hospital. The mental, physical, and financial consequences of their injuries shape their lives forever. This is a public health crisis of astonishing proportion."[18]

It is also clear that individual Christians who experience gun violence can undergo profound spiritual crises as part of the aftermath, whether or not their churches are

[17] James E. Atwood, *Collateral Damage: Changing the Conversation About Firearms and Faith*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019), 19.
[18] [No author listed] "Amnesty International report" (September 12, 2018).

connected closely enough to respond. In her searing memoir of suffering and recovery from an act of workplace violence, Evangelical writer Taylor Schumann describes a profound spiritual crisis. Hiding in a closet (where she would soon be found and shot by her assailant), she had ample time to think about those she would leave behind. "That's when the tears came," she writes, "along with my first coherent prayer. *God, I can't sit here and wait to die. If you're going to take me, please just take me quickly. Please. Please. Please.* It is a surreal experience, praying to die quickly."[19] The lessons she takes from a long and only partial recovery are also marked by ongoing emotional and spiritual dislocation: "The thing is, though, for my entire life I believed in a God who would heal me, should the need arise. And here we were. The need was there, and there he was, choosing not to heal me. Who was this God?...I didn't know this God."[20] At the same time, she admits her "daydream" of a miraculous healing and the opportunity to "give glory to God for the miracle [as] people from all over would hear the good news of a God who rescued and healed a young woman from her gunshot injuries. Can you picture it? I certainly could."[21]

This finally culminates in a profound dissatisfaction with the "thoughts and prayers" of those unwilling to accompany the victims of gun violence: "As I watched more lives being taken and more lives ruined by gun violence, I found little solace in people offering to think and to pray. Instead, I was feeling pulled apart at the seams and broken open."[22] It is here that she comes to find a sense of God's presence and care – and a call to respond to the suffering of others. It is in terms of that call that her own congregation's inaction and silence become especially conspicuous to her. She senses that their solidarity would be firmer if her recovery unfolded along the more familiar trajectory she daydreams about earlier. One suspects she is correct: although she attends her church regularly and identifies strongly as a Christian, her community seems to have little to do with her ongoing care once the immediate trauma has passed.

Her story reminds us that gun violence, like all trauma, is something Christians may well struggle with theologically. However, it also underscores that how individuals bring

[19] Taylor S. Schumann, *When Thoughts and Prayers Aren't Enough: A Shooting Survivor's Journey into the Realities of Gun Violence*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 14.
[20] Schumann, *Thoughts and Prayers*, 23.
[21] Schumann, *Thoughts and Prayers*, 31.
[22] Schumann, *Thoughts and Prayers*, 98.

those struggles to church, if they even do not do so out loud, may well be happening in ways that seem to go against the preferred roles and theological narratives of their own community. Along those lines, others remind us that churches themselves may be grappling unaware with their own fears of violence, losing a sense of how they also may be going against the preferred roles and theological narratives of themselves. Rosalind Hughes has written about the Biblical and theological ambiguity of "locked doors" to a sanctuary, arguing that "the decisions that we make to lock or unlock doors cannot be made solely on the basis of our own safety. We have responsibilities, as leaders within and examples to our communities, that extend beyond our walls."[23] Elsewhere, she admits,

> we have all fallen short of the glory of the "All Are Welcome" sign. "Visitor profiling" of one sort or another is sometimes recommended as a congregational security measure. Looking for people who seem "out of place," or anxious, eager, or desperate, over-zealous or unforthcoming feels like a blunt tool, though….[24]

Especially, we might add, in contrast to the welcome of Jesus described in the Gospels. Hughes concedes that locked doors may be necessary at times, and that particular communities may be vulnerable in ways that demand protection. But she is attentive to how Scripture itself can be used to justify instincts toward self-protection that can prove difficult to challenge, especially in communities where vulnerability is harder to identify and privilege may be present and unacknowledged. Noting how the account of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem can be (mis)used as a resource for churches, she observes,

> Nehemiah has been cited as a biblical sanction by some recent commentators, but that feels to others like an anachronistic reading of Nehemiah's precarious position. We are not surrounded by enemies as Nehemiah's Jerusalem was. We are not a threatened minority…Historically and predominantly Black churches have a different story to tell than the mainly white churches that are their neighbors, which is to say that the calculation is different for those affected, afflicted, or threatened by the atrocities of white supremacy. But in our current context, for many churches, to claim the tentative status of Ezra-Nehemiah's audience is disingenuous.[25]

[23] Rosalind C. Hughes. *Whom Shall I Fear? Urgent Questions for Christians in an Age of Violence*. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2021), 30.
[24] Hughes, *Whom Shall I Fear?*, 60.
[25] See especially "Nehemiah" Chapters 1-6; Hughes, *Whom Shall I Fear?*, 27-8.

That said, one wonders how Taylor Schumann's predominantly white, upper middle class suburban Evangelical congregation might have worked to help her feel safe and to feel seen in her ongoing struggles with the collateral damage of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and a host of other challenges. Her vulnerabilities, while embedded within a position of relative privilege, are real and go unnoticed, according to her telling. It hardly seems "disingenuous" for her community to wonder if concrete steps to "harden" the building as a potential target might be taken. With that in mind, it seems Hughes might not be taking such circumstances fully into account alongside her larger caveat.

However, the point is not to highlight the seeming blind spots of Hughes, but rather to indicate the complexity inherent in the many ways that gun violence can intersect with the lives of American Christians. Hughes is not alone in decrying the response of churches to violence, and especially to gun violence. Gaffney (2018), Claiborne and Martin (2019), Austin (2020), Hays and Crouch (2021) all draw closely on Scripture and American history to argue that "gun culture" (which we will describe in more detail in Chapter Two) can be connected with tragic misreadings of Scripture and tradition by Christians.[26] By contrast, these authors place great emphasis on the power of corrective interpretation to reorient the Church toward a more redemptive, peace-building witness. As Claiborne and Martin write,

> this gun crisis is not just an 'issue.' Its casualties have names, faces, and tears. And this is also a deeply spiritual matter. It is about a God who suffers with those who suffer, who promises the tomb is empty and death will lose its sting. This is a redemption story. It is about a God who redeems Cain, Tubal-Cain, the young man who killed Papito, and the person who sold him the gun…and even you and me.[27]

Similarly, Gaffney observes,

> as Christians, we are called first and foremost to practice compassion—to see people in need and be moved to action. We are witnessing the impacts of increased gun violence—from friends deciding finally to purchase a handgun for protection to a pervading sense of hopelessness from living in a society that can turn into

[26] Donald V. Gaffney, *Common Ground: Talking About Gun Violence in America*. (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 2018); Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, *Beating Guns: Hope For People Who Are Weary of Violence*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019); Michael W. Austin, *God and Guns in America*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); Christopher B. Hays and C.L. Crouch, *God and Guns: The Bible Against American Gun Culture*. (Nashville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021).

[27] Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, *Beating Guns,* 44.

> something like a war zone. What is a compassionate Christian response in the face of such violence?[28]

Gaffney's "we" is important to note. In ways we will expand upon shortly, the practical theologian Emmanuel Lartey reminds that "there are very many different forms of equally valid Christian faith," and that accordingly, it is important to ask

> questions about *who* it is that are engaged in the theological tasks, what the social location of the persons are, *who benefits from what is done*, who is *excluded* by the way things are done and who are *oppressed* by it.[29]

This dissertation will seek to show that this is a complicated question when it comes to guns and American Christians. Yet for Gaffney, "as Christians, we…" have a clear mandate to resist, not only gun violence, but guns themselves.

Moved to (very different) Action

In fact, there are other American Christians who, in Gaffney's terms, "see people in need" and are "moved to action"—indeed who may also be wondering what a "compassionate Christian response in the face of such violence" might be—and who purchase guns as a result. In some cases, this also involves taking a significant public position. For example, in 2012, California pastor Dr. Gary Cass asked a Texas church conference, "how can you protect yourself, your family, or your neighbor if you don't carry a gun? If I'm supposed to love my neighbor, and I can't protect him, what good am I?" Texas pastor, Rev. James McAbee, known as "the pistol packin' preacher," carries a Glock in church and has been interviewed on local news that "it's very important that every church, pastor and all, have a gun."[30] In 2017, an Evangelical megachurch in Florida, The River at Tampa Bay, made international headlines when a sign it had posted at every entrance over a year before went viral on social media: "PLEASE KNOW THIS IS NOT A GUN FREE ZONE," it reads. "WE ARE HEAVILY ARMED — ANY ATTEMPT WILL BE DEALT WITH DEADLY

[28] Gaffney, *Common Ground*, 95.
[29] Emmanuel Lartey, "Practical Theology as a Theological Form," in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, eds., *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 131. Author's italics.
[30] David R. Brockman, "Pistol Packin' Christians," *Texas Observer*, January 13, 2016. https://www.texasobserver.org/pistol-packin-christians/. Accessed 31 October 2022.

FORCE — YES WE ARE A CHURCH AND WE WILL PROTECT OUR PEOPLE." The message is signed "THE PASTORS." According to Associate Pastor Allen Hawes,

> it is a deterrent…Look at what is going on. In the past two months, look at what happened in Texas [the 2017 Sutherland Springs church shooting]. Look at what happened in Las Vegas [2017, the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history]. Because we are a church that is on television, we are very involved in the community. We want people to know that this is a safe zone."[31]

While not all pastors would similarly choose to carry, many share a deep concern for the safety of their congregations.[32] According to a 2019 survey by Lifeway Research, as many as 45% of pastors report that having armed church members is a part of their overall church security plan. Others have uniformed police officers or security, suggesting that up to 51% of American churches have firearms at any given Sunday service. Lifeway reports, "evangelical pastors (54%) are more likely than mainline pastors (34%) to say they have armed church members. Half of pastors in the South (51%) and West (46%) say this is the case, compared to a third of those in the Northeast (33%)." By contrast, 27% of churches have a "no firearms" policy—particularly those led by Black pastors, 50% of whom report such a policy, with 8% even installing metal detectors at church entrances as a precaution (3% nationally across all racial backgrounds).[33] Alternatively, Strategos, a security training company which identifies as Christian and which conducts trainings in churches (among other organizations), seeks to emphasize prevention and de-escalation, above all,

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[31] Howard Altman, "Tampa church warns: We are armed and ready to use deadly force," *Tampa Bay Times*, November 17, 2017. https://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/crime/Tampa-church-warns-We-are-armed-and-ready-to-use-deadly-force_162712686/. Accessed 1 November 2022.

[32] Some remain adamantly opposed to guns, nonetheless. As the Evangelical John Piper has written: "I think I can say with complete confidence that the identification of Christian security with concealed weapons will cause no one to ask a reason for the hope that is in us. They will know perfectly well where our hope is. It's in our pocket." John Piper, "Should Christians Be Encouraged to Arm Themselves?" *Desiring God* (website) (December 22, 2015). https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-christians-be-encouraged-to-arm-themselves. Accessed 2 November 2022.

[33] "Most Churches Plan for Potential Gunman, Divided Over Armed Congregants" *Lifeway Research* (January 20, 2020). https://research.lifeway.com/2020/01/28/most-churches-plan-for-potential-gunman-divided-over-armed-congregants/. Accessed 2 November 2022. See also Aaron Earls, "Half of US Churches Now Enlist Armed Security" *Christianity Today* (January 28, 2020). https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/half-of-us-churches-now-enlist-armed-security.html. Accessed 2 November 2022.

but will provide gun training if asked. In 2015, they completed 30 training events (with and without gun training) for churches a year. In 2020, they completed 300.[34]

Yet guns can also become more than a means to "defend" a church and its ministries. In some congregations, guns can be present without being framed as a response to a "problem." They can be tools of largely conventional ministry in their own right. In 2014, the Rocky Mount United Methodist Church in Jemison, Alabama, turned an unused part of its church campus into a gun range. The *Christian Science Monitor* reports as follows:

> Originally, the idea was to teach parishioners how to use guns, but the gun range has since grown into a unique ministry, says Pastor Phillip Guin.
>
> "In 2014, we were exploring ways to reach out into the community and engage individuals who might never consider the ministry of the church…We had a rather large area behind the church that was undeveloped, full of kudzu, a general eyesore, and we began to pray about how we might utilize the space."
>
> After several parishioners said they had purchased guns but didn't know how to use them, the church decided to create a gun range.
>
> "We are in the south, people own guns, they love guns, but many do not have a place where they can safely practice their use," Guin explained.
>
> Guin says guns are a great way to bring people to God.
>
> "We pray that this ministry will touch the lives of those who use it with the grace of God," he says. "It is certainly unconventional, but I view the range as a means of grace...that is, we reach out in the name of Christ to a population that might never darken the doors of any formal church building."
>
> He added, "This is about bringing people together in a safe, loving, Christian environment."[35]

According to the pastor's description, in establishing a gun range, the congregation identified possibilities for evangelism, stewardship of church property, and care for its

[34] Kimberly Winston, "God and Guns: How Religious Leaders Have Responded to Mass Shootings in Places of Worship," FiveThirtyEight.com (November 4, 2021). https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/god-and-guns/. Accessed 10 May 2022.

[35] Husna Haq, "Why Parishioners Are Packing Heat At One Alabama Church," *Christian Science Monitor* (August 13, 2015). https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2015/0813/Why-parishioners-are-packing-heat-at-one-Alabama-church. Accessed 2 November 2022.

members, and even saw guns as a way people to "bring people to God" and as "a means of grace" allowing them to "reach out in the name of Christ." The project came as a result of collective discernment and prayer, as so many programs of congregational outreach do.

Again, Lartey's questions might well be asked: if this program emerges from Biblical and theological discernment *who* it is that is engaged in doing the discerning, what is the social location of those doing it, "*who benefits from what is done* […] who is *excluded* by the way things are done […] and who are *oppressed* by it?" One might also wonder if the pronounced "churchiness" of the project truly bespeaks the congregation's deep comfort with firearms, or if it might also reflect any number of other dynamics: the naivete of church leadership, or conversely, the presence of a purposeful media strategy designed to downplay negative perceptions in what quickly became a national story.[36] And if it was in part the latter, who benefits, is excluded and oppressed in *that*, as well? Another way to approach those questions might be to ask: to whom is a church with a gun range designed to appeal? Who might be willing to "darken the doors of a church building" now that a gun range is present? Who will not—and if not, why not? Returning to Atwood's call for churches to account for "collateral damage," how might the presence of a gun range affect the congregation's ability to minister to people suffering as a result of violence, and particularly gun violence?

Moreover, Christian witness is scarcely confined to churches. As Peter Manseau has noted, "For many American Christians, Jesus, guns, and the Constitution are stitched together as durably as a Kevlar vest." He notes how some gun manufacturers, among them companies that produced weapons later used in mass shootings, explicitly proclaim themselves to be Christian companies. He writes,

> Daniel Defense, the Georgia company whose gun enabled the slaughter at Robb Elementary School [in Uvalde, Texas], presents its corporate identity in explicitly

[36] By contrast, in September 2015, the First Pentecostal Church of Aberdeen, Mississippi announced a contest to for who could bring in the most visitors that month, for which the prize was an AR-15 rifle and 100 rounds of ammunition. It had apparently held a similar contest previously with some success. When a UK pastor (also Pentecostal) wrote of his surprise and concern on a blog, the church quickly withdrew the prize, with the Aberdeen pastor admitting: "My heart is hurting as I really did not think the promotion all the way through…I know that must sound foreign to you, however we have had weapons since we were children. This is the way all of us were raised…." *Grace + Truth* blog (August 21, 2015, updated September 6, 2015). https://gracetruthblog/2015/08/31/the-church-that-gives-away-assault-rifles-to-whoever-brings-along-the-most-new-people/. Accessed 10 May 2022.

> religious terms. At the time of the shooting, the company's social media presence included an image of a toddler with a rifle in his lap above the text of Proverbs 22:6 ("Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it"). For Easter, it posted a photograph of a gun and a cross resting on scriptural passages recounting the Resurrection.[37]

Another engraves custom AR-15s in their "Crusader" line with a quotation from the Psalms. For many, the sense that Second Amendment rights are God-given and close the Gospel are proudly affirmed and deeply held.

Approaching Guns Theologically

This project does not take up these particular case studies, which I include simply by way of illustration. Such stories remind us that guns are deeply woven into the lives of many American Christians, and that this can appear many different ways. How this is so remains subject to critical scrutiny, as I have already tried to indicate. However, as these stories suggest, even within that broad familiarity and comfort with guns, many Christians still ponder gun usage theologically, and as we will see, Scripturally, in ways that shape their practice. Moreover, in reciprocal fashion, their practice also shapes their understanding of theology and Scripture. How they do so is a central focus of this dissertation.

Of all the questions that might be asked, why that one? It is clear that "being the church" in 21st century America may abruptly bring questions about guns and gun violence – and how to grapple with them – to the fore in any number of places, in part as pastoral issues. As I will indicate in Chapter Three, those questions are also being pondered theologically in any number of formal and denominational contexts. In addition, we might further acknowledge the work of political theologians, with their interest in (according to one broad definition) the complex ways that theology intersects with "the various ways in which humans order common life."[38] Guns are, indeed, closely associated with creating

[37] Peter Manseau, "How We Came to Believe in Guns," *New York Times* online (June 23, 2022). https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/23/opinion/uvalde-evangelicals-guns.html. Accessed 23 June 2022.
[38] Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, "Preface," in Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xii.

order and disorder**,** so it makes sense to ask how theologies are operating behind and within tasks associated with "ordering." Chapters Four and Five will offer some suggestions there. Similarly, public theologians, most notably Katie Day, are already exploring how Christian witness might contribute to civic debates about guns and understand its own participation as an expression of what it is to be faithful. Day writes,

> for public theologians, we understand that the Sixth Commandment is not just about individual behavior. God values each individual life and wills us to be woven into an interdependent society reflecting God's image…We have to critique a society based on fear of neighbor…Here, the unregulated freedom of the individual ironically becomes the tyranny that threatens human community.[39]

I am grateful for that work. Yet it is easy to lose sight of particularity when theology speaks politically and publicly. In doing so, both political and public theologians risk oversimplifying how theologies are operating in the circumstances they describe and how they might do so more critically (and one hopes, more effectively). Keeping a close eye on the granular, even at its most messy and unresolved, may well prove to be an important source for identifying where further reflection is needed, as well as for ongoing correction to critical perspectives that also, of course, come "from somewhere" and benefit from keeping that squarely in view.

The point is not that studies such as this one seek to be an explicit alternative, much less a rebuke, to other approaches, but that it seeks to come alongside them and contribute to a deeper conversation. Speaking with individual believers also reminds us that the public square and the academy are not the only places where theology happens. As we have already seen, theology is something that people do, both in community and by themselves. It makes sense to ask how they are doing it and with what effect. In that same spirit, Jeff Astley has noted that, "although the overwhelming majority of contemporary 'God talkers' have not studied theology formally at all, they are inevitably engaged in doing

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[39] See Katie Day, "Gun Violence and Christian Witness," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Vol 14, issue 5 (May 2014). https://learn.elca.org/jle/gun-violence-and-christian-witness/? Accessed 9 May 2022. Also by Katie Day, see "Gun Violence in the US: The Challenge to Public Theology," in Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Hohne, Tobias Reitmeier, eds., *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology: Proceedings From the Bamberg Conference 23-25.06.2011*. (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), 161-173; also "God and Guns in the U.S.: The Role of Religion in Public Discourse" in Niclas Blader and Kristina Helgesson Kjellin, eds., *Mending the World? Possibilities and Obstacles for Religion, Church, and Theology*. Church of Sweden Research Series 14. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Books, 2017), 213-230.

their own theology if and when they speak and think about God, or at all events when they do with any seriousness."[40] This study seeks to better understand how owning and carrying a gun engages some Christians in speaking and thinking about God, and it seeks to hear people do so on their own terms, however informal those might be, recognizing that what they say is theological in in its own right.

Studying Guns as A Task of Practical Theology

Individual Christians engage the theological task in a variety of ways, including listening to sermons, serving on church committees or as part of an armed church security team (or deciding not to do so), to personal Bible reading and private prayer. Such a list is by no means exhaustive, but it suggests the breadth of ways that "guns come up" as a matter for Christian reflection. Both in community contexts and personal ones, many American Christians are scrutinizing their practice around guns in different ways. As will be explained in more detail below, this study will seek to describe and reflect upon some of the ways in which that happens, as well as to show the depth with which some American Christians attempt that scrutiny.

This study also explores a curious discrepancy in the broad statistical portrait of US gun violence, as described by the Gun Violence Archive and others. Numerically, the homicides are many, but so are the suicides and the injuries; the mass shootings are few, and so are the "defensive" gun uses by citizens (which are statistically distinct from police shootings, known as "officer-involved incidents"). That is to say, the prospect of homicide is sobering, to say the least; however, the risks of suicide or accidental injury are notable, while the risks of a mass shooting or successfully defending against violence are relatively rare. Yet for many gun owners, the rewards outweigh the risks. How a group of American Christian gun owners articulates the choices this sometimes involves and the broader view of the world in which they live, and how their faith shapes and is shaped by those choices and their sense of life in that world, will be a significant part of this study, and are part of its

[40] Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Learning and Listening in Theology*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 56.

intended contribution. I will clarify those terms and my sense of that contribution, as well as how I have tried to structure them both, in more detail below.

For now, I want to note that, while I have drawn on sociological literature, my primary aim has been to engage American gun ownership theologically. While gun ownership and carrying are sources of meaning and identity for gun owners, how Christian gun owners make meaning and understand identity *as Christians* has remained unexplored. Because of that, explanations of the role of faith in gun ownership and carrying tend to be cursory and reductive—presented, for example, as a context for reinforcing conservative social values and gender norms.

While that is surely true for some gun owners, it is not true for all. Moreover, to the extent that sociologists seek to understand how Christian gun owners find and make meaning, there is much that might be gained in seeking to attend more closely to the language and practices of faith. However, this dissertation has a different focus. It seeks something somewhat more reciprocal—not only what Christian theology has to teach us about Christian gun owners, but also what Christian gun owners can teach us about Christian theology. We have already suggested some of the ways in which theology is happening within the context of gun violence, as situations provoke theological reflection in many different contexts, from the formal and academic to the personal and every day. With Lartey, I will suggest that who benefits, who is excluded and even oppressed all have a great deal to do with how theology is done and the kinds of religious knowledge it comes to affirm. I consider this to be true of academic theology and "ordinary theology," and so I will draw on both in order to better identify the claims and the silences, the beneficiaries and excluded as they emerge around this particular practice that some Christians do.

To that same end, as noted in the Introduction, I will also draw on Christian Ethics; however, I want to re-emphasize that this does not seek to be a study in Christian Ethics. Again, it is a work of Practical Theology, and as such, is distinct from ethics in approach and intent. There is overlap between the fields, especially since they share an interest in practices—the things Christians do—and the underlying logics of why they do them. Practical Theology often thinks ethically as it tries to imagine how practices might be revised, particularly so with an awareness of those on the margins, whether it be the margins of a local church, an institution of the Church writ large, or the broader society

upon which the Church understands itself as called to reflect and offer its witness. Practical Theology's call to reflexivity also overlaps with ethics, for it seeks to understand who is asking the questions of a practice and what their commitments might be. However, ethics seeks norms in a way that Practical Theology does not, for Practical Theology prefers to seek more complex, layered, ways of naming how people think they know and respond to God in what they do. In that, norms are simultaneously personal, institutional, civic, and theological, and somewhat resistant to the narrowness of questions like "what is the right thing to do?" Bonnie Miller-McLemore has famously described Practical Theology as the study of a "living human web," which is to say, it explores the deeply contextual ways in which identity is formed and re-formed. For example, pastoral care, she observes, "now requires understanding the living human document [i.e., the person and their "story"] as embedded within an interlocking public web of constructed meaning. Policy issues that determine the health of the living human web are sometimes as important as issues of individual emotional well-being."[41] Her point is that identity is profoundly interdependent and enmeshed in systems and institutions that can shape horizons of experience and perceptions of choice quite significantly. It is that web, and not, narrowly ethical "decisions" or acts, that Practical Theology wants to explore—even though decisions and acts are important parts of the web.

This chapter has already tried to suggest some of the ways in which multiple theologies are at work on the subject of guns in American society. The questions we might ask are not limited to professed Christians or what they should "do," either individually or collectively. This is characteristic of Practical Theology, which acknowledges that while an inquiry may stop for a time, it never really ends: the kind of reflection it seeks to do remains dynamic and ongoing. Thus, this particular project does not seek to know "how a Christian carries a gun," or what would make it more (or less) "Christian" to do so as duties are balanced in the "proper" way. I am as interested in how a believer's understanding of being a "Christian" comes together in practice as I am with if and how practices (especially around guns) get deemed somehow more or less, closer to or further from what is

[41] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "The Living Human Web: A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective." *Pastoral Psychology* (2018) 67: 305-321, 313.

"Christian." By whom and with what effects would be my next questions with regard to the latter. Once again, with regard to the academic field of Christian Ethics, this study sees itself as standing "upstream" from any specific decisions a Christian gun owner might make about if, when, or how to carry a firearm. Whether they should or what would make it "Christian" if they did are not my questions, even though I would be interested to know how others would respond to such a question.

This Study

In trying to listen at the intersection of guns and faith, one might approach the task in any number of ways. For example, ecclesial ethnography, studying a specific site of theological reflection and worldly engagement and how that reflection takes place, might be one logical starting place.[42] Theological Action Reflection, in which a group grapples collectively with a question directly related to its own life and practice, attending to how many different theological "voices" are operating and how, as part of a path toward institutional growth and change, offers another strategy. There is no question either would be immensely helpful. However, it is also true that what Astley has described as "ordinary theology" (about which more, presently) does not happen only in shared places or in ways that are shared. Even beliefs that are understood as shared by others are, nevertheless, individualized in ways that can be hard to explain, much less justify. What a practice "means" as a group might define it, and what it means "to someone" specifically may be closely related but not the same. "Agreement" is hard to read, as are the ways in which any number of social dynamics and personal blind spots might be operative. With that in mind, I have tried to remain attentive to how the individual and the shared remain in tension.

[42] One very promising new study attentive to Bretherton is Michael Remedios Grigoni, *The Gun in US American Life: An Ethnographic Christian Ethics*. Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University (2020). Grigoni seeks to engage and problematize the Christian ethics of personal gun carrying, drawing on "ethnography as a means of generating moral descriptions of the myriad ways that guns shape our common life," and the thick description of gun carrying practices and of mourning victims of gun violence. Unfortunately, Grigoni's dissertation is embargoed until January 2023 and could not be consulted for this study. See Duke University Libraries, Duke Space: Scholarship by Duke Authors. https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/22206. Accessed 13 November 2022. See also Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.)

In order to clarify these issues still further, I have tried to speak with American Christian gun owners in a variety of locations: rural, suburban and urban; who use guns for a range of purposes (farming/hunting as well as personal safety); and almost all of whom identify either as Black or white.[43] All but two are Protestants, not by design, but simply because recruitment of Roman Catholics, in particular, was not successful. Of the twenty-four individual participants, ten identified as women; the rest identified as men. While I have drawn significantly from all the interviews, I will not make significant comparison or contrast between male and female "views," even within the small sample of interviews I conducted. This is because I hold the intersectionality of identities to be vitally important in recognizing the complex places from which people speak, and it will be clear from the interviews that many participants did so with a keen awareness of both their own race and gender. I would also heartily welcome further work that focused squarely on gender and guns and engaged more points of comparison and contrast than I have had space to explore here. I do wish I had been able to interview more white women (I spoke with four.) My methodology had to shift online because of COVID (including recruitment, which came to rely on "snowballing.") These women were interviewed prior to that, as part of mixed focus groups. Some did not participate actively in that context. As a result, a focus group made up of white women would have been a wonderful addition to the study.

There is a more direct treatment of race. To be clear, this is not because I consider racial identity as uninflected by concerns of gender, but because I have tried to hold those identities together, conceptually. To some readers, this may be more clear in the voices of the Black women with whom I spoke; however, it is true in principle for all participants.

With such connections in mind, methodologically, I have drawn on Thomas Groome's model of "shared praxis" and on Jeff Astley's "ordinary theology." I will now briefly describe how I have done so.

[43] I will follow the practice of capitalizing Black but not doing so for white. There is no single stylistic practice around the orthography of race, although the *Chicago Manual of Style*, which I have followed for this dissertation, suggests that capitalization of Black is optional. I have elected to do that in order to resist subtle forms of erasure or disrespect in academic discourse. However, I elect not to do so for "white" in order to reject any association with white supremacy, with its particular ways of privileging "White" identity.

Shared Praxis

How do you speak with Christian gun owners when you find some willing to speak and to reflect on their practice? One central challenge is getting from the nitty-gritty of "what people do" to ways in which what they do is value laden. As Elaine Graham has emphasized, practice is "also the bearer of implicit values and norms…[It] is constitutive of a way of life, both individual and collective, personal and structural."[44] That is to say, it is (as Graham says) "purposeful activity," both in the sense of actions done "on purpose" and in the service of deeper, perhaps even unconscious purposes that mark the doers "as both the subjects of agency and the objects of history."[45] I have indicated some other ways that practical theologians "turn over the carpet," as it were, and try to gain a sense of how people weave together the elements of their faith and constitute/reconstitute their ways of life. We have already seen how experiences of gun violence can spur reflection and reevaluation (or not), both for individuals and for church communities, demanding "purposeful activity" of many possible kinds by way of response, and with many possible expressions of value being brought to bear. However, even outside of circumstances of violence, owning a gun and the practices associated with it bear a complex series of implicit and explicit values, and gun ownership and carrying participate in a particular history. Such connections are obvious to some gun owners; for others, they are less so. For most, it is probably true that some aspects of their own experience are more relevant, or decisive than others, if they think about it.

Thomas Groome's model of *shared praxis* offers one approach by which they might do so. As developed initially in his *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (1980), and then more fully in *Sharing Faith* (1991), *shared praxis* asks participants to undertake collective reflection and formation through five stages, or "movements": Naming/Expressing Present Action, Critical Reflection on Present Action, Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision, Appropriating Story/Vision to Participants' Stories

[44] Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*. (London: Mowbray, 1996), 110.
[45] *Ibid.*

and Visions, Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith.[46] The movements engage "context" on at least two levels. First, they ask participants to engage questions of how their experiences and perspectives inform and re-form their understanding of the Christian story/vision (or perhaps, "stories and visions," plural). Second, they also create a new, if temporary, context within the group itself. The process is therefore not simply reflective of the respective wisdom of its participants; it also generates such reflection and creates (an expression of) Christian community.

Groome has clearly been shaped by liberationist perspectives, not only in the theological work of Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, but especially by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Along those lines, he argues that while much religious education and the institutions that support it attempt "to teach people to be religious in a particular way", its deeper vocation is far beyond a knowledge of doctrine, seeking instead "to engage the whole 'being' of people, their heads, hearts, and life-styles…to inform, form, and transform their identity and agency in the world."[47] The connection to liberative work is clear. As he elaborates, "our aim [in religious education] is not simply that people know about justice, but that they be just, not only understand compassion but be compassionate, and so on."[48]

Groome also sees a great deal for the church to learn from believers, because the nature of religious knowledge is far more complex than is often acknowledged. A more comprehensive description of the human subject, the one who learns or comes to know, points to a far broader theological field that is only just coming to be explored. Drawing on Heidegger, Groome discusses the human subject as an "agent-subject-in-relation," as a way to underscore the importance of consciousness and context to any account of "being." As he sees it, it would be shallow at best to talk about the one who learns, what learning is, and what its purpose properly should be outside of this more robust approach to human subjectivity. He writes: "the whole ontic being of 'agent-subjects-in-relationship' is actively

[46] Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980); *Sharing Faith: A Different Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry The Way of Shared Praxis.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
[47] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 2-3.
[48] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 8.

engaged to consciously know, desire, and do what is most humanizing and life-giving (i.e., 'true') for all."[49]

With that in mind, religious education (at least as he conceptualizes it) is more a hermeneutical principle than a set curriculum – he sees it as a way of being in the world, participating in the "reign of God," a term he uses to highlight "an act of reigning rather than a particular realm or domain." He argues that "by using *reign* of God it seems possible to retrieve the symbol as inclusive and active rather than as an exclusive and static place."[50] This emphasis on process and, to a lesser extent, flow are offered as counter-symbols to that of church as an institution, and even theological knowledge itself as bounded and defined. The hermeneutical principles of Catholic Social Teaching are not explicitly mentioned but are not far away—their capacity to call the church to account for its response to the Gospel is very much in the same spirit as his work. His is a theology that *moves*. Thus, he observes, "Since the beginning of the church, orthodox Christian faith has affirmed that the Jesus event has significantly changed our human condition, augmenting its potential for fullness of life and orienting us effectively toward God and God's intentions for us." He then adds, "but from the beginning too the church has struggled to express this transformation in language meaningful for different times and places (usually called soteriology)."[51]

For Groome, this is what *praxis* engages, as "the consciousness and agency that arise from and are expressed in any and every aspect of people's 'being' as 'agent-subjects-in-relation' whether realized in actions that are personal, interpersonal, sociopolitical, or cosmic."[52] The product of his proposed method, then, is theology formed under generative conditions, in which participants in the work of *shared praxis* test and clarify their beliefs on many interrelated levels – beliefs about the world and the self, as well as (but not limited by) more official and normative religious teaching as they understand it. The goal of such a process is to foster "conation," an idea closer to wisdom than simply knowledge,

[49] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 9.
[50] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 14, 15.
[51] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 22.
[52] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 136.

and embodied in a rich religious subjectivity that is capable of skilled improvisation in living as a Christian in one's own context.

Again, drawing on liberationist emphases, Groome embraces religious knowledge as "political," at least in the broad sense of "enabling the shared life of citizens," and he admits he is wary of any "version of Christian tradition that legitimates present ecclesial and social/political arrangements, and/or a privatized account of Christianity that anesthetizes people's sense of social responsibility." Groome particularly wants to "uncover and make accessible the subversive and emancipatory memories from the tradition" that would challenge that "anesthetized" version of the Christian life. His intentions seem especially grounded in the context of affluent, individualistic American Christianity. His focus on the act of "'be-ing' in this combined noun/verb sense of human identity and agency" seems especially powerful as a lens through which to discern one's place within larger structures of privilege.[53]

For practical theologians, *shared praxis* offers a great deal. Groome is interested in what happens to people inside and outside of institutions, and his understanding of religious knowledge is far richer than simply how any given institution might define (and seek to control) it. "Knowing" as he describes it seems far closer to living than it does to, say, being able to provide the correct answers on a test. *Shared praxis* embraces that theology is happening not only continuously, but also in many complex and personal ways. Moreover, as a cycle of "movements," it invites participants to engage (and embrace) that.

Yet I would emphasize, somewhat more than Groome, that the stages he outlines also matter in their own right. It is not only that one moves from "experience" to "theology" (or in the direction of "wisdom") over the course of a whole process; what *shared praxis* reveals is how both are deeply present and interwoven at every step. Moreover, one of the most significant ways *shared praxis* contributes to Practical Theology might well be in how it offers several critical vantage points at which that connection can be identified and assessed. How that identification might be attempted will be described shortly.

Others have read Groome along broadly similar lines. In an important critique, Bonnie Miller-McLemore has identified that Groome's conation "starts to sound

[53] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 13, 8.

interchangeable with the idea of human potentiality in general," and also that it has "an essentialist dimension…especially when he refers to 'an innate ethical disposition' to the good."[54] Recalling, for example, Groome's observation that "the Jesus event has significantly changed our human condition, augmenting its potential for fullness of life and orienting us effectively toward God and God's intentions for us," we can see some of that essentializing to which Miller-McLemore refers. How are we to understand what "fullness of life" looks like (or does not), or what it looks like to be "effectively oriented" (or not)? If our lives are not "full" or "effectively oriented," does that mean that theology is not happening? In fairness, his further point is that it is the church's language that changes – and implicitly, that *shared praxis* offers a way to track such changes and invite people into how their own language may be changing in light of their experience. Surely, that must happen for some. However, at times Groome also seems to be appealing to some sort of timeless core of truth which simply gets expressed in new ways, as if the words may change but the essence remains the same. This seems to diminish the theological insight with which individual believers work out their own perspectives on life and God, as if the distinctiveness does not fundamentally matter. One suspects that many practical theologians would argue it that it does, suggesting that it is precisely here that what Groome (as we saw) critiqued as the "social/political arrangements, and/or a privatized account of Christianity that anesthetizes people's sense of social responsibility," and how believers seem to find ways to resist that (however partially), might be most directly engaged. Groome tends to conflate soteriology and transformation, by which he seems to mean that a salvific experience must be transformational. Yet one might well wonder if all transformations are, necessarily, salvific. And who decides whether they are or are not?

Similarly, in an extended reading of the work of Charles Gerkin, Elaine Graham makes several observations that seem also pertinent to Groome on this point. She notes that Gerkin "acknowledges the vulnerability of the Christian story to other narratives, but fails to identify how the context of the Christian story itself is compromised."[55] Although Groome sees in *shared praxis* the very occasion for "new revelation" itself or for "occlusive

[54] Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Disciplining," in Dorothy C. Bass *et al*., *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters.* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2016), 201.
[55] Elaine Graham, *Transforming* Practice, 26.

perspectives" to be engaged (in ways that Graham finds conspicuously absent in Gerkin), Graham is nevertheless right to caution that appeal to the Christian story does not necessarily lead to robust critical perspective. The potential for reinforcing the Christian story's own coercive and repressive elements very much remains. Groome tends to see the "real truth" about the Christian story as unequivocally liberatory, however coopted or diminished in practice by tradition. His solution seems to be a call for more reflective practice, yet it remains unclear by whom, for whom, or in what contexts that might occur.

With those qualifications in mind, *shared praxis* still has a great deal to offer as a model of action-research. Other models, particularly Theological Action Research (TAR) engage groups at key moments of decision or transition in their collective life and seek to name the theological complexity in such moments—the distinctive "voices" to which TAR closely attends. These offer a rich portrait of how belief shapes and is shaped by different stakeholders, with that reflection undertaken collectively and, potentially, transformationally. However, in the present instance, the ways in which a church community gathers to ponder what it believes or intends to do about guns may not capture the ways in which its individual members ponder what they personally believe or intend to do (or are doing) about guns. Beliefs may or may not be shared and consensus with one's church may not be relevant, even as people learn from one another. Not all theology happens in or for churches, nor do all practices that someone considers "Christian." Moreover, a one-time, non-church gathering might offer a safe space for discussion and critical discernment in a way that the ongoing relationships of a church do not. With that in mind, this study has been conceived as one of *shared praxis*, even as it welcomes other projects and approaches.

Ordinary Theology

Earlier, we noted Jeff Astley's reminder that theology is done by many more than solely those with formal training and that such theology should be considered a valid expression of belief. His call to explore "ordinary theology" attempts to highlight how common "God talk" is and how profoundly contextual it is and remains. He writes,

> my purpose is to offer a "theology in context." We should take the proposition "in" seriously. It expresses "position within" and is to be distinguished from "into," which would suggest that the theology that we need to do here lies beyond and flourishes outside of all contexts, but may condescend to move or orientate itself toward one of them. "In" is a preposition of inclusion, not direction. It is used to express the sense that theology needs to be done from inside a particular framework of interests and concerns.[56]

Although he does not write with *shared praxis* specifically in view, Astley's observation fits what we have just named as one of its central drawbacks. Moreover, he points to the importance of understanding how theology is being done "from inside a particular framework of interests and concerns." Again, I have emphasized that what *shared praxis* offers particularly well is a way to name those interests and concerns at various stages and to invite theological engagement around them, not a way to read "through" them to the real truth.

For Astley, theology is emphatically personal, both in the sense of a thinking that is done by individuals, and in thinking that concerns matters they hold to be highly important to them. He writes, "our embracing of faith compels us to speak here of the truth of theology as an 'encountered truth'; It is the sort of truth that we do not just know, but are 'in.'"[57] With that in mind,

> what matters here is what saves us, what heals us, what works for us. And therefore, what we need to be saved from and for…At the very least, what we find to be salvific for us will affect what we count as central to the tradition and therefore which Psalms we don't sing, which bits of the creed we reinterpret, which words of father we take seriously. That is how Christianity changes…This selectivity constitutes one very practical way in which people exercise a critical perspective on their tradition.[58]

Thus, Astley seeks to distinguish theology, "the views of any individual thinker on the nature of God," from doctrine ("communally authoritative teachings") and dogma ("doctrines defined as essential to Christian faith by universal assent").[59] Theology also connects closely with faith practices as sites where selection, revision, and reimagination are happening. This project will extend that approach further still, demonstrating that for

[56] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 1.
[57] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 36.
[58] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 40-1.
[59] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 53.

some Christians, gun ownership and gun carrying are deeply theological, and in that sense, might be considered faith practices, if perhaps not "church" ones.[60] Following Astley's formulation, these practices "work for" some Christians and deeply reflect their sense of what they "need to be saved from and for," both physically and spiritually.

But is "ordinary theology" really happening under *shared praxis*? I believe that it is. Both are seeking to highlight critical perspectives on faith. For the "ordinary" theologian, "what saves us" and "what we need to be saved from and for" ask questions of tradition just as surely as they do of experience. *Shared praxis* offers one process by which such questions might be asked and believers invited to take stock in ways that may be largely familiar at some points and entirely new at others.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to begin with experience by offering a statistical snapshot of U.S. gun violence and gun ownership over the last five years, suggesting ways in which such statistics can then represent problems – most immediately in the form of experiences happening to individuals and communities – that Christians are seeking to address in a number of different ways. It then proposed a methodological rationale how to focus on practices of gun ownership, in particular, as one of those ways, with an eye toward understanding how gun practices can be understood as something Christians do. In order to place those practices more squarely in context, Chapter Two will offer a history of gun ownership and gun rights, and will engage with several recent excellent sociological studies of gun owners. It will also draw on descriptions of the United States as a "gun culture," and describe how such a term continues to shape debates over the place of guns in America—a question that will turn out to have significant theological resonance.

[60] The questions Rosalind C. Hughes asked of churches in *Whom Shall I Fear?* suggest how quickly practices can take ecclesial form, as (for example) they shape how hospitality is enacted or what forms of mission are embraced or rejected. It might also be noted that taking part in a church security team (as some do who were participants in this study) blurs any easy distinction between faith practices and ecclesial ones.

Chapter Two

"Gun Culture" in Historical and Sociological Perspective

Introduction

Chapter One suggested some ways to understand the scope of American gun violence and of gun ownership. Some of that emerges from the statistics provided, as does the fact that the scope of gun violence and of gun ownership are essentially unique relative to other nations. We have also briefly seen how churches also share – and seek to respond – to such concerns. Recalling Elaine Graham's emphasis on practices as "purposeful activity" by people acting as "both the subjects of agency and the objects of history," it seems clear that owning, as well as carrying a gun should be considered not only as a way of "doing something" (exercising agency), but also of receiving and reflecting particular histories in particular ways. As Graham elaborates, "forms of practice…create and police the boundaries of dominance and subordination, power and powerlessness, upon which any social order may be constructed."[61] As we will begin to see in this chapter, this might well be described as literally true of guns and gun ownership across a broad span of U.S. history.

More immediately, we will trace the emergence of a complex reading of that history, centered around the idea of America as having/being a "gun culture." As we will see, this is an idea with various academic as well as popular/political expressions, within which (following Graham) "boundaries of dominance and subordination, power and powerlessness" are drawn or at least described. To some a dubious distinction at best, to others a point of pride, the notion of a "gun culture" will be seen to undergird much of the ways that the gun owners in this study imagine and describe their practices.

Gun Culture as a Useful Idea

Writing in 1972, and responding to a decade of shocking, high-profile assassinations, whose victims had included the Kennedys, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and

[61] Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 110.

Malcolm X, the eminent American historian Richard Hofstadter wrote a blistering reflection for *American Heritage* magazine, titled "America as a Gun Culture." Noting the vast discrepancy in incidence of gun violence in the United States in comparison to other "modern industrial urban" nations, Hofstadter observed that "what began as a necessity" of life on farms and frontiers had firmly rooted itself in the American imagination, becoming part of male identity, in particular—persisting in very different contexts and with catastrophic results. As a result, "many otherwise intelligent Americans cling with pathetic stubbornness to the notion that the people's right to bear arms is the greatest protection of their individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy."[62] He saw this as an expression of political and cultural history that had been contested along the way and remained contestable in the light of later history. Moreover, he was particularly attuned to the racial politics of owning and carrying a gun. For example, he noted that,

> from the days of colonial slavery, when white indentured servants were permitted and under some circumstances encouraged, to have guns, blacks, whether slave or free, were denied that right. The gun, though it had a natural place in the South's outdoor culture, as well as a necessary place in the work of slave patrols, was also an important symbol of white male status…In light of the long white effort to maintain a gun monopoly, it is hardly surprising…to see militant young blacks [i.e., the Black Panthers]…accepting the gun as their instrument.[63]

Coexisting with and connected to that politics, as Hofstadter saw it, were significant cultural practices, particularly for white males, that enculturated the young into their station and its concomitant duties—not to mention some of its privileges. Here again, he was caustic:

> For millions of American boys, learning to shoot and above all graduating from toy guns and receiving the first real rifle of their own were milestones of life, veritable rites of passage that certified their arrival at manhood. (It is still argued by some defenders of our gun culture, and indeed conceded by some of its critics, that the gun cannot and will not be given up because it is a basic symbol of masculinity. But the trouble with all such glib Freudian generalities is that they do not explain cultural variations: they do not tell us why men elsewhere have not found the gun essential to their masculinity.[64]

[62] Richard Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture," American Heritage Vol. 21, issue 6 (October 1970). https://www.americanheritage.com/america-gun-culture. Accessed 15 November 2022.
[63] Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture," 6.
[64] Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture," 4.

In the subsequent half century, Hofstadter's particular analysis has had its supporters and its detractors, but the phrase "gun culture" has proven a durable one on all sides. It continues to be used widely across academic fields and within political debates, including writing by NRA vice-president Wayne LaPierre and speeches by then-president Sandy Froman, who opened the 2002 NRA national convention by saying, "I'm Sandy Froman, and I'm proud to be part of the American gun culture."[65]

For supporters of gun rights, "gun culture" seems to point to a highly valued, deeply felt principle: that gun ownership is fundamental to American identity. Contrary to Hofstadter's understanding, many consider "gun culture" as a largely unqualified positive. Moreover, as Craig Rood has emphasized, gun enthusiasm is framed part of a larger culture war. He notes former NRA President Charlton Heston's praise for "traditional family units, cops who're on your side, clergy who aren't kooky, safe schools, certain punishment, manageable conflict." Heston urges action on behalf of "good Americans…who find themselves under siege and long for you to get some guts, stand on principle, and lead them to victory in this culture war. They are sick and tired of national policy that originates on Oprah, and they're ready for you to pull the plug."[66] As Obert, Poe and Sarat argue, many gun-rights supporters "consider guns to be the material embodiment of civic agency. For such advocates, the world is a forbidding and dangerous place, and the state is, at best, an incomplete protector."[67] With that in mind, they argue that guns need to be considered

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[65] James Welch IV has written thoughtfully about the more recent connection between the NRA and the "culture war," noting how NRA President Charlton Heston, in particular, articulated an understanding of gun rights as the linchpin to freedom that restrictions would profoundly jeopardize, if not destroy. For Welch, the ethos of the gun in American culture has become a central symbol of defying persecution and tyranny. "It is not enough to be bewildered and confused, [Heston] says, to sit back and watch America changing around you—you must take affront. Under the guise of creating a more responsive, egalitarian America, progressives are in fact bringing about its permissive, decadent ruin." 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), 148. For Froman's quotation, see Scott Melzer, *Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War*. (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 6. LaPierre has written: "What is the 'gun culture'?...To millions of Americans, the term refers to America's traditional bedrock values of self-reliance, self-defense, and self-determination. To others…the term is pejorative." See Wayne LaPierre, *Guns, Freedom and Terrorism* (Nashville, TN: WND Books, 2003), 196, as quoted in Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 29.

[66] Charlton Heston, *The Courage to be Free*. (Kansas City: Saudade Press, 2000), 172, 188, as quoted in Craig Rood, *After Gun Violence: Deliberation and Memory in an Age of Political Gridlock*. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 67.

[67] Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat, "Introduction," *The Lives of Guns*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17.

"not merely as the carriers of action, but also actors themselves,"[68] that is, as shaping the actions of carriers in profound ways. Alternatively, we might say, following Graham, that if people are both "subjects of agency" and "objects of history," then to pick up a gun is, to place oneself within that history—in ways that might be deliberate in some ways and in others that might be unforeseen or unacknowledged.

Gun Culture to Gun Cultures?

In this respect, it may be less accurate to speak of a singular "gun culture," as if it were one set of ideas slowly maturing through history into its fullest expression. A more accurate approach might be to recognize multiple "gun cultures," related in some ways but not in others, with different identities and allegiances being forged. The context of the practice holds significant indications of its meaning. Thus, sociologist Barbara Stenross notes the significant differences in the respective cultures of hunters, competitive target shooters, and gun collectors. She concludes, "all were 'regulars' in their leisure worlds; a few were 'insiders' who professed their subculture's views via official and unofficial positions of leadership in local and national associations. Yet the avocationists sometimes struggled with and against other meanings of guns." For example, Stenross reports the response of one hunter she interviewed, who told her, "I'm not a gun person, I'm a hunter."[69]

Similarly, Scott Melzer's (2009) qualitative study of NRA members identifies three distinct sub-groups within those interviewed: "critical mass" members who are typically official "life members" (a formal category of membership) and identify to a high degree with the organization's official positions (on which they have voice and vote), "reserves" who do so much more loosely but who can be rallied or brought closer under particular circumstances, and "peripherals," who scarcely identify with the political work of the organization and may not even renew their membership in any given year, for a host of

[68] Obert, Poe and Sarat, *Lives of Guns*, 3.
[69] Barbara Stenross, "The Meanings of Guns: Hunters, Shooters, and Gun Collectors," in William R. Tonso, ed., The *Gun Culture and Its Enemies.* (Bellvue, WA: Second Amendment Foundation/Merril Press, 1990), 55, 52.

reasons.[70] Such distinctions must remind us that overly broad descriptions of "gun culture" often fail to account for the multiple cultures with which gun-owners identify and the ways in which that interplay of cultures shapes their understanding of what it means to own and use guns.

Learning to Need Guns

There are also important economic histories for firearms that have shaped America's "gun cultures" in powerful ways. Pamela Haag's magisterial *Gunning of American Culture* (2016) describes how a private market for firearms of any kind was actually quite slow to develop in the United States, even in the period when shotguns and rifles would have been quotidian tools for a larger percentage of Americans.[71] According to Haag, ongoing industrial production required the development of markets beyond that of the United States government (or those of other nations)—such that any hope for creating supply depended on generating demand. Even as the West was still actively being "won," the marketing of firearms was inscribing the centrality of the gun to that project. Haag observes,

> the cowboy was no more the product of American individualism than the Winchester rifle itself, although both were becoming icons. The legends that would become "facts" about the American gun culture made gun violence both more common and more coolly righteous than it was. The violence of the lone gunman was not the violence we most had, but it was, apparently, the violence we most preferred.[72]

She underscores the importance of

> understanding the gun culture as an artifact of ambition, the agonistic, bottom-line legacy of businesses acting like businesses…The gun debate has been mired for so long in rights talk—about what gun owners have a right to do and what gun-control advocates have a right to force them to do—that it has been forgotten as a business, and also as a matter of conscience.[73]

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[70] See Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, passim.
[71] Pamela Haag, *The Gunning of American Culture: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture*. (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
[72] Haag, *Gunning of America*, 201.
[73] Haag, *Gunning of America*, 390.

Moreover, as William Hosley has noted, this cultural project was not without its own form of moral argument. According to Hosley, when Samuel Colt claimed that "the good people of this wirld [sic] are very far from being satisfied with each other & my arms are the best peacemakers," there were many who seemed to agree sincerely.[74] In 1852, the *Hartford Daily Times* "described Colt's invention as 'not without its moral importance… [because] men of science can do no greater service to humanity than by adding to the efficiency of warlike implements, so that the people and nations may find stronger inducements than naked moral suasion to lead them towards peace."[75] As Haag and Hosley both demonstrate, Colt was a remarkably adept promoter and businessman, and with that in mind, it would be easy to read the marketing of guns as "peacemakers" as an utterly cynical ploy. However, it is in part through such marketing that guns have come to be as Obert *et al.* describe, "not merely as the carriers of action, but also actors themselves," helping to shape the roles and practices of those who take them up.[76] Similarly**,** Darryl AH Miller notes, "weapons are symbols as well as instruments….[but] [i]t is the social meaning of guns…and not just the consequences imposed by gun ownership that animate our most contentious debates over the Second Amendment and gun policy." Notably, "[g]un ownership can symbolize integration into the larger national political community. Guns have historically been a symbol of who can be a citizen, who can 'partake in the imagined life of the nation…[and] enter into [its] mythologies.'"[77]

Gun Culture 2.0

Hofstadter's original article identified much the same dynamic of symbolic integration identified by Miller, though only for some—those who were permitted to have guns and were "integrated"/those who were integrated and were permitted to have guns.

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[74] William Hosley, "Guns, Gun Culture, and the Peddling of Dreams," in Jan E. Dizard, Robert Merrill Muth, and Stephen P. Andrews, Jr., eds. *Guns in America: A Reader*. (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 48.
[75] *Hartford Daily Times*, January 5, 1852, as quoted in Hosley, "Peddling of Dreams," 52.
[76] Obert, Poe and Sarat, *Lives of Guns*, 3.
[77] Darrell A.H. Miller "The Expressive Second Amendment" in Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, Martha Merill Umphrey, eds, *Guns in Law.* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 50, 51; see also Ford Vox, "Enough with the celebratory gunfire,' CNN.com, August 21, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/03/opinions/vpx-celebratory-gunfire-danger/, as quoted in Miller.

Others could not and, in that, their outsider status was clearly demarcated and communicated. As we have seen, Hofstadter also noted how deeply gendered such a process was. How religious identity relates to and differs from identity as part of the "larger national political community" was not part of Hofstadter's analysis. However, more recent scholarship has begun to explore such questions. This is seen particularly in work by Kristen Kobes DuMez, who has emphasized the link between a politicized American evangelical movement and a hypermasculinity. "From the start," she argues, "evangelical masculinity has been both personal and political. In learning how to be Christian men, evangelicals also learned how to think about sex, guns, war, borders, Muslims, immigrants, the military, foreign policy, and the nation itself." She goes on to note a "common sense of embattlement" between the NRA and conservative white evangelicals.[78]

As Scott Meltzer observes in his deeply thoughtful study of NRA members, "moral outrage is a cornerstone of the culture wars, especially surrounding the big three culture war issues, 'Guns, gays, and God.'"[79] Yet Meltzer goes on to describe a range of "worldviews" operating, even within a broadly conservative organization, such that even the NRA must be recognized as "a large and not always uniform group." Rather, it is one that reflects distinct strands of libertarianism, anticommunist militarism (and later, neo-conservativism), as well as traditionalism.[80] As Meltzer has shown, it is important to recognize a range of agreement and engagement within the membership of the NRA itself.[81] Thus, what members most relate to *and* the degree to which they do so (in whole or in part) are equally complex.

That sense of "embattlement" described by DuMez has emerged in dynamic relationship with what sociologist David Yamane has described as "Gun Culture 2.0" Specifically, Yamane has said that "the center of gravity is shifting away from the historic emphasis on hunting, recreational shooting, and collecting to the contemporary emphasis

[78] Kristen Kobes DuMez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020), 296.
[79] Scott Melzer*, Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War.* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 131.
[80] Meltzer, 131 and Chapter 5.
[81] Melzer*, Gun Crusaders*, 171.

on armed self-defense. I call this a shift from Gun Culture 1.0 to Gun Culture 2.0."[82] He notes the expanding legal protection for concealed carry, but also argues that

> the growing practice of concealed carry that is facilitated by these laws also creates a number of new challenges for individuals who do so, as well as for the broader social worlds (other people, spaces, places) in which they do so. These challenges are individually and collectively addressed through the developing culture of armed citizenship—both the hardware of material culture like guns, accessories, and other products, as well as the "software" of ways of thinking, legal frameworks, and the development of relevant abilities.[83]

If Yamane is correct about a shift from one form of gun culture to another, the attendant shift in purposes for and strategies around guns clearly engages questions of practice. On the other hand, as we noted earlier from Graham, it may also lay bare "the boundaries of dominance and subordination, power and powerlessness upon which any given social order may be constructed."[84] Hofstadter suggested how earlier evocations of guns as part of the pastoral lifestyle and a rite of passage for boys failed to explain why this lifestyle and these rites were considered so important. In some ways, Gun Culture 2.0 might be far more direct about its fears. But as DuMez suggests, the disjuncture between Gun Culture 1.0 and Gun Culture 2.0 is also keenly felt by many gun owners as they navigate between nostalgia for a particular vision of the past and a sense of embattlement with regard to their place in the present. She also suggests how closely some connect to their Christian faith as they seek to make sense of the difference.

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[82] David Yamane, "What's Next? Understanding and Misunderstanding America's Gun Culture" in Craig Hovey and Lisa Fisher, eds., *Understanding America's Gun Culture*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 159; see also Yamane, "The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture," *Sociology Compass* 11 (7), doi:10.1111/soc4.12497.

[83] Yamane, "What's Next," 161.

[84] Again, this comes from Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 110. Any attempt to understand "gun culture" would do well to recognize how any of its many expressions or configurations exist as part of a complex field of discourses. To name just two, Jonathan Simon has explored how a "culture of fear" with particular roots in the 1960s resulted in the War on Crime and the reconstruction of citizenship with reference to potential victimization, requiring government intervention in a staggering array of forms; David Garland has similarly noted the rise of penal and social control in the contemporary U.S. and Britain, exploring how this has shifted the experience of both crime and insecurity with disastrous effect on individual freedoms. He has called this transformation the rise of a "culture of control." The ways in which the individualistic practices of "gun culture" react and respond to the social policy and policing apparatus of "the culture of fear" and "the culture of control" can be highly charged, to say the least. Jonathan Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Second Amendment Issues

It is within this broader context of gun culture(s) that Second Amendment issues, a notorious flashpoint for discussions about guns, need to be considered. The political scientist Robert J. Spitzer, perhaps the dean of empirical studies on guns in America, has synthesized a number of perspectives in very meaningful ways. For Spitzer, the politics of guns are nuanced and suggest broader questions about the relationship between individual citizens and society, and of course most especially, government. Responses to such questions engage a powerful combination of worldview, perceived self-interest, political influence, and public relations. Spitzer elucidates in great detail the ways in which lobbying, lawmaking, and legal precedent have understood the proper place of guns in American Society from its origins to the present. Summarizing much of our discussion thus far, he seeks to answer, "why do relatively simple metal-and-wood objects that do nothing more than propel small bits of metal at high speeds evoke such strong feelings?", noting both how "the presence and easy availability of guns magnify the violent strain in the American character, multiplying its deadly consequences," as well as

> the long-term sentimental attachment of many Americans to the gun, founded on the presence and proliferation of guns since the early days of the country; the connection between personal weapons ownership and the country's early struggle for survival and independence followed by the country's frontier experience; and the cultural mythology that has grown up about the gun in frontier and modern life, as reflected in books, movies, folklore, and other forms of popular expression.[85]

His description of a gun as "relatively simple," of course, is deliberately shorn of cultural meanings in order to press the point of how its technical functionality can never serve as an adequate description of what it represents. Elsewhere, he notes, "those who acquire guns for self-protection are reacting to the perceived and real threats of modern American life. One study of those who own guns for self-protection found key explanations in feelings of vulnerability to crime and police ineffectiveness." Besides that, he also indicates that, while "people who use guns to defend themselves are usually able to thwart crimes…[for many reasons] such instances are rare—no more than 1% of incidents."[86] That a gun may not

[85] Robert J. Spitzer, *The Politics of Gun Control*. Seventh edition. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 17-18.
[86] Spitzer, *Politics of Gun Control*, 87-88.

offer an *effective* solution to vulnerability does not mean it is not seen as a solution. Alternatively, one might ask if there are multiple forms of vulnerability involved, with physical harm offering the stated reason for much new gun ownership, but with other forms of contested self-understanding or social identity also being felt as somehow at risk.

Contested self-understanding merits mention here because the legal history of firearms is also very clearly a cultural and social history. Sarat et al., have acknowledged the "contested legal meanings of guns" from several different historical and legal perspectives, including the evolution of legal standards around self-defense and, relatedly, the duty to retreat. The power of law to both reflect and shape social norms, particularly around guns, is a central aspect of their work. The challenges posed by guns "are rooted in different views of history, the practices of legal and social institutions, and the self-conceptions and relationships associated with owning, or being asked to regulate, guns."[87]

Along those lines, legal scholar Mary Anne Glendon observes that much in "rights talk" is notable for its "missing languages" of responsibility and sociality.[88] Second Amendment rights seem like a prime example, with the important qualification that "responsibility" is often fundamental to how those rights are understood. What that responsibility "looks like" and demands are a very important part of what is being contested, and the social norms that are being asserted.

Likewise, Carl T. Bogus asks how attempts to understand "the impact of regulation on the level of gun violence in America" often plays out as a narrowly "Second Amendment" question, but is, in fact, more complicated than simply a question of legal rights. That said, attempt to engage with other forms of social scientific research in the service of understanding what factors might make America safer often implicitly rely on some of the same assumptions, most notably, what Bogus refers to as "good guy/bad guy thinking." Such binaries are by no means limited to gun carriers and other supporters of robust Second Amendment rights. For example, he notes that psychological profiling and criminal background checks, policy approaches that many gun violence prevention advocates support in some form, do not appear to be particularly effective in anticipating dangerous,

[87] Sarat, *et al*., "Contested Legal Meanings of Guns," in *The Lives of Guns*, 14.
[88] Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*. (New York: Free Press, 1991). **PAGE**

much less lethal behavior, even if issues of privacy were not considered. To be on the side of regulation is not without its own assumptions. As Bogus argues, "given the myriad complexities involved with the process of buying a gun, it is impossible to reliably make the distinction on which the good guy/bad guy model depends." For Bogus, this is not to say that regulation is impossible – quite the opposite – however, "those seeking effective gun regulation will need to take the long view,"[89] and to find ways to reframe the issue "beyond" the good guy/bad guy model.

This is all the more true since 2008, when a closely divided Supreme Court issued a major interpretation of Second Amendment rights in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, holding that the amendment as written asserted an individual right to own a gun, not (as was the prevailing legal understanding of U.S. Constitutional law until then) a right to bear arms specifically as part of a duly-constituted citizens' militia unit. The decision, written by Justice Antonin Scalia, claimed to be based on an "originalist" interpretation of the United States Constitution—and therefore closely grounded in principle to the "Founders' intent" and to Colonial American history. Michael Waldman has persuasively shown the ambiguity of such a historical claim, particularly in the context of the early state constitutions drafted alongside the United States Constitution. Some clearly understood the right to bear arms as an individual right; others did not. Gun control was just as much a social value as was the more familiar ideal of the independent yeoman.[90] Similarly, Saul Cornell and others have argued that

> finding a truly originalist meaning of the Second Amendment requires discovering what it meant to Americans in 1791, and how it related to fears and aspirations rooted in eighteenth century ideas and social realities. A faithful, historical study of the Second Amendment would show no certain meaning exists. If this historical ambiguity were taken seriously in Second Amendment jurisprudence, a critical part of Justice Scalia's justification for *Heller* would crumble.[91]

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[89] Carl T. Bogus, "The Hard Simple Truth about Gun Control," in Sarat *et al*., *Guns in Law*, 12-13.

[90] Michael Waldman, *The Second Amendment: A History*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015). See also Saul Cornell, *A Well-Regulated Militia: The Founding Fathers and the Origins of Gun Control in America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Cornell also directly addresses the logic of Justice Scalia's judicial opinion in "The Changing Meaning of the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, 1688-1788: Neglected Common Law Contexts of the Second Amendment Debate," in Sarat, *et al., Guns in Law*, 20-48.

[91] Saul Cornell, "Changing Meaning," as quoted in Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merill Umphrey et al., "An Introduction: The Contested Legal Meanings of Guns," in Sarat, *et al*., *Guns in Law*, 9.

Since *Heller*, the proliferation of "Stand Your Ground" laws (currently in 30 states) has similarly up-ended long-standing (if as some would suggest, gradually eroding) precedent dating back to the English Common Law, and its understanding of a "duty to retreat" if at all possible, in the name of limiting bloodshed.[92] It is highly questionable that such a view is simply a working out of legal principles to their all but inevitable conclusion. Sociologist Elizabeth Anker has argued that "Stand Your Ground" laws need to be understood, not as history, but as particularly modern expressions of "agency panic…in which individuals feel increasingly powerless within a complex global society, while the forces of control are difficult to discern." One response has been the rise of what she terms "mobile sovereignty," within which "carrying a gun produces a portable and privatized sovereignty without a fixed territory or known borders, setting up an ever-shifting and unpredictable range of individual control."[93]

Other important (and venerable) juridical and political questions surround various qualifications of the individual right to bear arms. These include exclusions of certain categories of weapon, such as machine guns, which have been far more strictly regulated dating back to the Prohibition Era and the National Firearms Act of 1934 and the Federal Firearms Act of 1938, which were early efforts at registering dealers and owners of machine guns, sawed-off shotguns, and silencers, and which prohibited the sale of firearms to persons convicted of violent felonies, thus offering law enforcement new authority to arrest gangsters, who were unlikely to register their weapons.[94]

Restrictions for those deemed mentally ill or temporarily dangerous have also been important and were a notable part of the rationale for the Brady Bill (1993), which mandated a five-day waiting period (also known as a "cooling off period") between the purchase of a handgun and its delivery to a prospective buyer, during which time a background check was also to be conducted. Interestingly, in the majority opinion for

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[92] Caroline E. Light, *Stand Your Ground: A History of America's Love Affair with Lethal Self-Defense*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017). Cornell also describes the Common Law's understanding of duty to maintain "the King's peace" in similar terms. (See Cornell, "Changing Meaning," in Sarat *et al*, particularly pages 21-29).

[93] Elizabeth Anker, "Mobile Sovereigns: Agency Panic and the Feeling of Gun Ownership," in Obert, et al., *Lives of Guns*, 25, 24.

[94] Greg Lee Carter, ed. *Guns in American Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, Culture, and the Law*, Vols. 1-3. Second Edition. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012). Here see especially Vol 1., xxvii.

Heller, Justice Scalia specifically notes that such restrictions are not, in principle, to be considered summarily invalidated by the court's affirmation of an *individual* right to bear arms.[95]

Throughout US history, municipal, state and federal law have grappled with the legal status of concealed firearms—a debate that very much continues, particularly as the National Rifle Association and others have made a significant legislative priority of mandatory inter-state recognition of concealed carry permits.[96] Anker's concept of "mobile sovereignty" is closely tied to such practices, and as we will develop more fully in the next chapter, shifting our critical perspective from legal rights to embodied practices will put certain visions of individual and collective flourishing in bold relief.[97] Clearly, concealed carry and "stand your ground" legislation are predicated on an individual's subjective feelings of safety in ways that complicate legal, professional, and traditional "rules of engagement" and the recognized penalties for doing so improperly.

The legal and political history of guns clearly shows that firearms and their "proper place" in local communities has always been a matter of concern and debate, with any legal right to do so distributed unevenly at best, and often asserted by elites as a form of protection against others in their midst whom it was deemed important to keep *unarmed*. This was especially true in the American South during slavery and after. The notion of an inalienable individual right to bear arms as enshrined in the Second Amendment has rarely been honored in practice, most particularly in areas of the United States where the right as such has been considered especially important.

Approaching Practices

Recalling Bogus' good guy/bad guy model (pages 48-49), others make it even clearer that those who would transcend such a model have their work cut out for them.

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[95] *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008).

[96] See Daniel Friedman, "National Concealed Carry 'Reciprocity': the NRA's Next Big Push, Explained." The Trace online (April 27, 2017). https://www.thetrace.org/2017/04/concealed-carry-reciprocity-nra/. Accessed 16 December 2022.

[97] See in particular, Harel Shapira's wonderful essay, "How to Use the Bathroom with a Gun and Other Techniques of the Armed Body," in Obert *et al*., *Lives of Guns*, 202.

The distinction is also fundamental to the work of Angela Stroud, whose 2015 study of concealed handgun licensees in Texas, *Good Guys With Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry*, explores in great depth the relationship between the practice of (concealed) carry and the identity that doing so, under certain conditions, allows some men to claim. For Stroud (among many others), this identity is articulated and understood in *moral* terms, as a demonstration of character. Yet it is far more than simply that. She writes,

> caught up in a binary idea of "good guys" and "bad guys," [her interviewees] use their concealed firearms as part of a much larger discursive strategy that obscures dynamics of privilege and inequality operating via race, class, and gender. Their CHLs allow them not only to feel that they are safe in a world that they perceive is increasingly dangerous; their licenses also confirm that they are one of the good guys, a status that is about much more than not breaking the law.[98]

As Glendon might suggest, a CHL (concealed handgun license) is very much about taking responsibility of a very particular kind. For example, Stroud notes that the situational awareness considered so fundamental to effective self-defense comes with significant psycho-social (and we might add: spiritual) burdens as well as benefits. "The process of being immersed in CHL culture," she notes, "fundamentally alters how one thinks about threat, violence, and self-defense."[99] Its vulnerabilities are experienced personally, in some respects more deeply so despite one's efforts. She also points to another aspect of Glendon's "missing language" of sociality in typical "rights talk," namely, what Stroud describes as "the reproduction of inequality." For example, Stroud notes, "gun users' framing high-crime areas as dangerous neighborhoods to be avoided at all costs, and particularly so when armed, obscures what we should be asking: not 'should I carry one or two guns,' but 'How is it that there are cities in the United States that can be described (accurately or not) as 'war zones'?"[100] In seeking (however fruitlessly) to manage their own senses of vulnerability and lack of control, Stroud's CHL carriers reflect and extend the

[98] Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 5. Later, she also notes that the good guys/bad guys distinction "not only [simplifies] a complex reality…it reinforces our individualistic culture and tells us that if we want to be successful, all we need is the right character and values." See Stroud, *Good Guys*, 156.
[99] Stroud, *Good Guys*, 144-145.
[100] Stroud, *Good Guys*, 153.

underlying structural inequalities in their communities that are a fundamental source behind so much of what they fear.

Jennifer Carlson's remarkable study of gun carrying in Michigan, *Citizen Protectors*, recognizes that white males are experiencing social and emotional consequences due to structural inequality, particularly as they seek to grapple with daily life in a context of tremendous economic instability. She identifies the rise of the "citizen-protector" as a form of socio-cultural response to and engagement with life "in an age of decline."[101] But while most studies of the NRA describe the development of its political influence, noting its strategic interpretation of American history and careful deployment of important cultural symbols (as we have seen), Carlson describes the NRA at a more local level, and identifies its significance as a locus of *moral* formation. The NRA, she says, "trains Americans to *perform* security—rather than just to purchase it."[102] We will explore the notion of performativity in greater detail below. What is more immediately notable is what, according to Carlson, the moral formation into a citizen-protector involves. Formal NRA classes rarely involve significant range time, for example, which is where the technical aspects of marksmanship become matters of "muscle-memory." Rather, the courses seek to pass along practices that "create a new way of going about life. [Gun carrying]…anchors a set of practices and moral dispositions associated with firearms into everyday activities."[103] At the heart of those dispositions is a willingness to defend not only oneself, but also others who might find themselves in a dangerous situation, whether as bystanders or targets. It is both "right to self-defense and a duty to protect."[104] This differs slightly from Stroud's work because, in this dual role of citizen and protector, there is an "embrace of protectionism as a civic duty." For Carlson, "that embrace lets gun-carriers see themselves not just as self-reliant and independent men, but also as relevant fathers and community members."[105]

Elaine Graham reminds us to remain attentive to ways in which the activities associated with identities such as "citizen" and "protector," each in its own right and

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[101] Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), *passim*.
[102] Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 69.
[103] Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 83.
[104] See Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, especially Chapter Four.
[105] Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 87.

together, can signify significant theological thinking at work. Such thought may not be articulated in the language of academic theology. More immediately, Carlson's description of the "citizen-protector" might be said to demonstrate an "other ethic" of a kind: notions of "protection" modify the "rights" orientation so often associated with citizenship in a pro-gun context. However, inequalities continue to be reproduced in significant ways, as Carlson's careful analysis of her own interview transcripts suggests repeatedly. Describing a conversation with Timothy, "a white gun carrier and father," Carlson notes his concern that his wife's refusal to carry a gun herself, despite her having been the victim of a robbery. "His wife's unwillingness to carry, to his mind, jeopardizes the safety of *his* son and, by proxy, undermines Timothy's own duty to protect his family… The bottom line is that what matters…is not so much whether his wife is protected…but whether his son is protected."[106] Although Timothy has a certain respect for his wife's individual conscience, his sense of responsibility is rather hard to distinguish from a sense of property.

Carlson's work helps us to see those for whom the decision to carry a gun represents a form of living out, or perhaps, living into their values, a process that often requires some internal negotiation, with a sense of permission to have a lethal instrument routinely in their possession, even "on their body" framed not as an ideal to be realized but as an exigency driven by necessity. This sense of "permission" is intriguing. Similarly, Harel Shapira has observed how important "proper technique" can become as a way of demonstrating proper *motives* for carrying in and through the training process. "Don't hold your gun like the gang-bangers" [i.e., in one hand and tilted to the side] Shapira hears one instructor tell a class. "They do it because it looks cool…but you don't own guns because they are cool. You own them because they will save your life….Owning a gun comes with responsibility."[107] Noting the racism articulated in such instruction, Shapira concludes, "the very articulation of a 'technique' for the armed body does important work of redefining the activity, shifting it from purely brutal behavior [often highly racially coded], in which

[106] Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 103, author's italics. It is also worth noting how NRA instructors admit trying to "use [maternal instinct] against" women in their courses who struggle with having the means to take someone else's life, using visualization to "help" those women imagine horrific scenarios of threatened sexual violence against their own children in order to get them to pull the trigger and commit to their own training.
[107] Harel Shapira, "How to Use the Bathroom with a Gun" in Obert, Poe and Sarat, eds. *The Lives of Guns*, 201.

violence is very present, to one in which that brutality and violence is recast as a civilized behavior [and also racially coded, if perhaps more obliquely]."[108]

Shapira's work further reminds us of the significant issues of performativity that are also at work in social situations – that selves are far from static and must always be understood as selves-in-relation, with identities being constructed and renegotiated in ongoing ways. Of course, this is true of gun carrying among different populations. Diane Marano's qualitative study of juveniles incarcerated on gun violations develops Hochschild's concept of "feeling rules" to define "what feelings, if any, a person 'should' have about his violent offending…[recognizing that] the ways we are 'supposed' to feel in different situations are socially constructed and that people in social groups are aware of the feeling rules for various occasions that apply to the members of that group."[109] At times, Marano's interview subjects remembered acts of armed robbery in ways that suggested they found the experiences (at least at times) thrilling and fun, only to reject those labels when proposed by the researcher, because of an unspoken "feeling rule" that "robbery was not supposed to be fun for the perpetrator." Yet at the same time, Marano also notes that sympathy for victims had little to no place, either, and was seen as un-masculine.[110]

Recalling our initial discussion of "gun culture," it is also very important to recognize multiple gun cultures coming into play. Some sociological work has attempted to name this, too. For example, as ethnographer Abigail Kohn has argued,

> I define a gun culture as one that places enormous social, historical, and political emphasis on guns (both positive and negative and every shard of gray in between). A gun culture has structural manifestations pertaining to gun ownership in a variety of geographic locales. Even a place not strictly associated with guns can have a version of gun culture if people in the area gather to talk about guns, buy and sell them, or recreate with them. A gun culture is one that uses a common language about guns and shares a set of signs and symbols pertaining to guns in everyday life. [111]

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[108] Shapira, "How to Use the Bathroom with a Gun", 202.

[109] Diane Marano, *Juvenile Defendants and Guns: Voices Behind Gun Violence*. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 100-101. For "feeling rules," see Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551-75.

[110] Marano, *Juvenile Defendants*, 101, 113-114.

[111] Abigail Kohn, *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Culture.* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

Kohn's image of a legal, public, avocational gun culture is particularly important for us to keep in mind as we engage the broader context of Yamane's "Gun Culture 2.0," with its heavy emphasis on personal security, and therefore, its concomitant ways of framing proper conduct, motive, identity, and broader emotions such as fear. Not all gun owners are self-consciously acting out of those particular concerns.

She also makes a distinction between gun owners and gun enthusiasts, identifying that "not all gun owners are inherently enthusiastic about guns." According to her research, gun enthusiasts delight "in talking about and shooting with other gun aficionados" and "organizing regular…activities around their gun interests," but other gun owners do not, understanding their practice (as we saw earlier) as more of a necessary evil.[112] She develops a key distinction from Csikszentmihaly and Rochberg-Halton between "pleasure," which they understand as "a subjective, individual sensation, an end in itself; [for which] consummation is the goal," as opposed to "enjoyment," which is "the integration of pleasure with a goal, a specific purpose that lies outside the sensation of pleasure itself." Elaborating on this point, Csikszentmihaly and Rochberg-Halton argue that enjoyment "implies self-control, the development of skills in the pursuit of voluntary as opposed to spontaneous goals."[113]

Recalling Marano's discussion of "feeling rules," it is striking how juvenile gun offenders might be understood to be managing and disallowing certain expressions of pleasure and admitting to some forms of enjoyment (but not others) in handling guns. Carlson and Shapira might well agree. In Kohn's study, both pleasure and enjoyment are evident, with attestation to the (simple?) pleasure of handling a gun clearly present, although it is different from the skills and broader identity of gun enthusiasm as it is defined and created through a set of activities and social practices. For our purposes, the distinction offers two helpful and important reminders. First, that while Christian hunters and sporting gun users may tend to see their own use of guns as "simpler" and "more innocent" than those of personal-safety users – as inherently pleasurable – that is likely only part of it. It may be more accurate to say that the nature of their "enjoyment" is

[112] Kohn, *Shooters*, 9.
[113] Mihalyi Csikzentmihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Reprint 1995. As quoted in Kohn, *Shooters*, 9.

different. Second, feeling rules may complicate expressions of both pleasure and enjoyment in carrying and using guns – what one is "allowed" to enjoy and how are worth defining carefully. of pleasure) are powerfully operating to frame enjoyment in particular ways.

Less obvious is the degree to which many gun users may be looking to guns to manage personal feelings of shame/inadequacy and the challenges of social stigma. Jimmy Taylor underscores that this is true, even among those whom Kohn would describe as white middle-class "gun enthusiasts," for whom locating oneself in the history and tradition of guns in American life and social connection within such activities and shared history has multiple entry points. Reflecting on his own research, Taylor notes that "the initial stages of interviews frequently included defensive efforts by individuals to portray themselves as 'normal,' in spite of their affiliation with gun culture…[I]interviewees also often lashed out with statements of distrust or rejection of outsiders, including academic researchers."[114]

Building on the work of Erving Goffmann and others, Taylor offers a powerful micro-analysis of the rhetoric of white gun-enthusiasts in both in- and out-group situations. In particular, he describes "dramaturgical stereotype busting," explaining that "gun subcultures have displays and performances that are designed to challenge stereotypes of them," and most notably, to challenge that their interest in guns is, in itself, a mark of deviance. Along these lines, Taylor notes the power of "appeal to higher loyalties" as a form of neutralization technique deployed against critics, such that

> individuals make verbal claims that their deviance is not in fact deviant, but rather, that it represents their commitment to more important responsibilities and values…[This] made collecting guns not only understandable in their eyes, but a moral responsibility.[115]

As we have seen, determining what is deemed "deviant" and what is not can be a fundamental concern when gun-users gather.

[114] Jimmy D. Taylor, *American Gun Culture: Collectors, Shows, and the Story of the Gun*. (El Paso, TX: LFP Scholarly Publishing, 2014), 113.
[115] Taylor, *American Gun Culture*, 120-121.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that central to the purposes of a "gun culture" are often deeper issues of creating and maintaining "boundaries of dominance and subordination."[116] The words are Graham's, but the idea is fundamental to Hofstadter, and as we have seen, the many ways in which those boundaries are imagined and expressed remain fundamental to the culture of guns. It is also clear that American gun owners participate in a long history in deciding to own and carry firearms, and that current discussion of gun rights draws actively on that history. Watson's identification of "higher loyalties" to define specific practices points, not simply to collecting guns, but also to carrying them. The practice is profoundly value-laden for many. For Christian gun owners, Watson's observation underscores the challenge of a complicated set of specifically Christian responsibilities. In Chapter Three, I will begin by identifying some ways in which Christian denominations and selected theologians have attempted to think about guns, specifically as *Christians*.

[116] Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 110.

Chapter Three

Theological Perspectives on Guns

Introduction

This chapter will suggest some of the ways in which churches—or more specifically, several Christian denominations—have spoken to the problem of gun violence in the last 40 years. As we will see, there has been a concerted attempt to ponder the problem theologically, although in particular kinds of ways. By contrast, in recent years, a small but growing body of "pro-gun" resources for Christians has also emerged, which we will also consider briefly. Finally, this chapter will draw on the work of several prominent Christian Ethicists to set the stage for what some individual Christian gun owners say and do not, value and do not value.

Denominational Engagement with Gun Violence

In Chapter Two, we saw that ever since the early 1970s, the idea of the United States as a "gun culture" has enjoyed a fairly wide reference among both those in favor of gun rights as well as those opposed to them. Similarly, the challenge of gun violence is broadly acknowledged, even if proposals for solving it remain contested. In that sense, it is unsurprising that many Christian denominations in the United States have pondered appropriate responses to gun violence, particularly on behalf of congregations. Some of the most notable include the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (1968, 1977),[117] United Conference of Catholic Bishops (1994, 2005, 2019),[118] Evangelical Lutheran Church in

[117] Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), General Assembly Resolution 7762, "A Resolution Concerning Handgun Control" (1977) https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/7762-GA-Resolution-Handgun-Control.pdf Accessed 29 November 2022;

[118] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), "Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action" (1994). https://www.usccb.org/resources/confronting-culture-violence-catholic-framework-action-0. Accessed 9 May 2022; USCCB, "Responses to the Plague of Gun Violence" (2019). https://www.usccb.org/resources/responses-plague-gun-violence. Accessed 9 May 2022.

America (1994),[119] United Church of Christ (1969, 1995, 1999, 2017),[120] Presbyterian Church (USA) (see especially 2010),[121] American Baptist Church (2013),[122] United Methodist Church (2016),[123] Southern Baptist Convention (2018),[124] and the National Council of Churches, USA (2010, reaffirmed 2018).[125] These frequently draw on Scripture or what might be broadly identified as "social teaching" (explicitly so in the case of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops). They typically (though not always) point toward particular policy solutions and often seek to define a broad ecclesiological rationale for political advocacy on behalf of these initiatives, often with a degree of denominational flavor, yet without being particularly "formal," or theologically-specialized. Thus, the Presbyterians allude to Calvin's teaching on civil authority and the Lutherans to Luther's, though without offering particular critical perspective on such teaching in either case. For example, the ELCA observes,

> according to Lutheran theology, society is to be ruled by the civil use of the Law. Government is responsible under God for the protection of its citizens and the maintenance of justice and public order [here it footnotes the Augsburg Confession]. Just laws and their proper enforcement by police and courts are necessary to restrain

[119] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "A Social Message on Community Violence" adopted April 18, 1994; reprinted 2020. https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Community_ViolenceSM.pdf?_ga=2.20568763.2099270595.1669743582-1448883953.1652119668. Accessed 29 November 2022.

[120] United Church of Christ, General Synod 20, "Resolution on Guns and Violence," (June/July 1995). http://www.new.uccfiles.com/pdf/GS-20-Guns-and-violence.pdf. Accessed 29 November 2022). http://www.new.uccfiles.com/pdf/GS-20-Guns-and-violence.pdf. Accessed 29 November 2022; UCC General Synod 31, "A Resolution of Witness on Recognizing Gun Violence as a Public Health Emergency," (June/July 2017). http://synod.uccpages.org/res10.html. Accessed 29 November 2022.

[121] Presbyterian Church (USA), 219th General Assembly (2010), "Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call," https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/gun-violence-policy.pdf. Accessed 29 November 2022.

[122] American Baptist Home Mission Societies, "10 Measures to Combat Gun Violence in the United States," (2013), as reported in John Rutledge, "American Baptists Take on Gun Violence," *Baptist Standard* (February 6, 2013). https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/baptists/american-baptists-take-on-gun-eviolence-2-11/. Accessed 10 May 2022.

[123] United Methodist Church, "Our Call to End Gun Violence" (2016). https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/gun-violence. Accessed 9 May 2022.

[124] Southern Baptist Convention, Resolution 8, "On Gun Violence and Mass Shootings" (2018). "SBC Messengers Adopt 16 Resolutions; Topics Deal with Immigration, Abuse, Gun Violence," *Alabama Baptist*, (June 20, 2018). https://thealabamabaptist.org/sbc-messengers-adopt-16-resolutions-topics-deal-with-immigration-abuse-gun-violence/. Accessed 29 November 2022.

[125] National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, "Ending Gun Violence: A Resolution and Call to Action by the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA," (February 23, 2018). https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/ncc-reaffirms-its-2010-resolution-on-gun-violence/. Accessed 9 May 2022.

> violence. But laws and their enforcement are often corrupted by sin. As citizens in a democracy, we have the responsibility to join with others to hold government accountable for protecting society and ensuring justice for all, and to seek changes in policies and procedures toward these ends."[126]

The strategy is indirect but the overall thrust is clear: *government* is responsible for protection and public order, and the proper role of citizens (in an admittedly sinful world) is not to take protection into their own hands, but rather "to join with others to hold government accountable." For its part, the statement does not elaborate what such accountability might look like or seek to clarify what citizenship entails. Here, it seems to mean voting and petitioning the government for redress of grievances.[127]

Similarly, the PC(USA)'s thoughtful social witness policy statement, "Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call" (2010) quotes Calvin's "theological perspective on the ordering of society that is based on the value of each human life as loved and redeemed by God and therefore in need of protection." The authors of the statement take this to mean that

> we creatures of the Living God have organized government structures that enable us to provide protection for all members of society. Our governments, then, most closely reflect the image and intentions of the Creator when they "defend the lives of all our neighbors," build community or "tranquility," and protect our citizens from harm.[128]

They note that, in Calvin's view, "The purpose of this [the sixth] commandment is, that since the Lord has bound the whole human society by a kind of unity, the safety of all ought to be considered as entrusted to each."[129] Yet at a denominational level, the PC(USA) has

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[126] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "A Social Message on Community Violence," 4; bracket is mine.

[127] It is important to note that the conversation around guns, citizenship, and "holding government accountable" has shifted significantly since 1994, when this statement was first drafted, and particularly so in the context of the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol during the certification of the Presidential Election, which occurred while the interview stage of this project was in process. For example, how one takes "responsibility to join with others to hold government accountable for protecting society and ensuring justice for all" could describe the work of a rioter as well as a poll watcher. What "accountability" entails and according to whom have become especially pointed questions in ways that this project may have only just begun to register. By contrast, earlier public theology by denominations may have assumed that government or "the public square" were more neutral spaces within which values and commitments were open to scrutiny and debate. What polarization means for public theology is beyond our scope, but remains an important question.

[128] Presbyterian Church (USA), "Gun Violence, Gospel Values", 9.

[129] *Ibid.*

understood this as a call to engagement with government in the form of advocacy, while acknowledging that

> gun violence as an issue is not new but has been building for decades—and the national church has not been silent about it. The PC(USA) and its predecessor bodies have addressed gun violence through the actions of eight General Assemblies in the last thirty years. Each resolution reflected a sense of moral urgency in response to rising gun violence and the cultural trends that contributed to it. Yet after these thirty years we see the same patterns continuing unabated…General Assembly resolutions have called on the church to be involved in education and advocacy at the federal, state, and community level…Little change has been seen in the policies enumerated, and these same calls can and should be echoed today.[130]

They view this as a call to renewed *political* responsibility yet underscore that their broader attention is to change the culture around guns—that the challenge is not simply one of laws or policy. To that end, they call for a more grassroots movement, arguing that "if the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), along with our ecumenical partners in peacemaking, are to be effective in facilitating social change, which is deeply grounded in our faith, we need to be smart and intentional about how to generate that change."[131] Even so, they conclude: "Significant social change is possible only when there are resources available to support movements that address policies, structures, and cultural values…[C]apital [to do so] comes in many…forms…[not only financial but also] social, cultural, and spiritual."[132] To some extent, the process of address seems as much a focus as the particular social changes they feel called to facilitate. What grassroots involvement appears to mean is calling the denomination at all levels to "become informed and active in preventing gun violence," to engage in acts of public witness, and to call for the following: "periodic preaching on gun violence," prayers for victims and perpetrators, "confession of our own complicity in the perpetuation and toleration of violence in all its forms in the culture," and similar measures.[133]

Our interest in these proposals is not in their merits, *per se*, but rather in the way they propose to do theology. While processes of discernment figure prominently, it is

[130] Ibid., 7.
[131] Ibid., 13.
[132] Ibid., 18.
[133] Ibid., 1.

discernment that moves deliberately, and somewhat uncritically, in the direction of gun violence prevention, and with a particular focus on keeping the issue before the denomination's congregations and the world at large. The self-reflection for which it calls most clearly is "confession of our own complicity," which seems to reinforce its own ways of formulating the problem. "Let us study and act to heed God's call to prevent gun violence," it says.[134] Yet it seems more poised to speak *to* (and perhaps for) the grassroots rather than to reflect theologically on the experiences of individual believers, or to engage them as theological thinkers in their own right, although the statement does call upon "citizens, hunters and law enforcement officials who regularly handle weapons properly to be wise examples in reducing risks and teaching how to prevent the misuse of deadly force."[135] It does not seem to imagine that they might do so *as Christians*, or that they might understand the decision to carry as a way of responding to the crisis as the statement so carefully outlines it.

Denominational Engagement with "Gun Culture"

More typically, the statements reflect on the role of violence, both as a source or rationale for gun culture, but as a culture in its own right.[136] As the 1994 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) "Social Message on Community Violence" argues:

> Violence between humans is an age-old mark of sin. Cain slew Abel; Shechem raped Dinah; David plotted the death of Uriah. Massacres, raids, and widespread abuse of people have been a part of our history. Those in power have often extended their racial, sexual, economic, and/or political domination through violent means. Violence is woven in and through the distinctive stories that have shaped us as

[134] Ibid., 19.

[135] "Gun Violence, Gospel Values," 2. Also, while still a broad policy proposal, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Resolution 7762 "Concerning Handgun Control" (1977) is nevertheless notable for its imagined scope, urging the President and Congress for "the necessary legislation which would prohibit the ownership or possession of all handguns, except for law enforcement officers; members of the armed forces; guards and messengers while on duty; licensed pistol clubs for on premises use; and owners of permanently inoperable handguns." The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has also affirmed in 1975, 1990, 2000, and 2019 "…that handguns may be accessible to law enforcement and military, and that civilians should have significantly restricted access." USCCB, "Response to the Plague of Gun Violence" (2019), 3. See also: "Handgun Violence: A Threat To Life" (1975), "New Slavery, New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse" (1990), and "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice" (2000).

[136] To be clear, the vast majority of denominational statements do not seek to *justify* gun culture; in noting their interest in various forms of "rationale," I mean to signal their attempts to ponder the place guns have in American life and how guns came to have that place.

> Americans. [Yet] If there is something timeless about violence, there are also disturbingly new aspects. Today the word violence evokes images of random shootings and muggings on city streets and country lanes; savage abuse of women, men, and children; senseless brutality depicted in movies, TV shows, and video games.[137]

This sense of "something timeless about violence" as well as its "new aspects" is expressed variously but is generally shared in many such statements, although the ELCA statement is notable for its allusion to American history and to violence as a particular tool of domination. That allusion makes the ELCA statement come closer to the descriptions of "gun culture" we examined in the last chapter than many statements seek to do. It goes on to note, "through prayer and absolution, the power of what God has promised is able to disarm our captivity to violence." That sense of "captivity" is especially noteworthy, particularly since it is something from which (according to the statement) we are *disarmed* by the promises of God and the practices of faith.[138] The implication, of course, is that to be armed is not an expression of freedom, but rather to be captive—to the dynamics of domination, the forces of American history, and the sin inherent in the human condition unredeemed by Christ. The moral stakes of modern violence could hardly be more serious.

Yet as we noted in Chapter Two, Darryl A.H. Miller argues, "weapons are symbols as well as instruments….It is the social meaning of guns…and not just the consequences imposed by gun ownership that animate our most contentious debates over the Second Amendment and gun policy."[139] The social meaning of guns bears mention here, if only to note that the ELCA statement seems to conflate social meaning and consequence rather significantly. As it says,

> violence breeds more violence. Incidents of violence stir up anger and a craving for vengeance. Fear festers an attitude of "we're not going to take it anymore." Increasingly, our national mood has been described as one of "getting mad and getting even." Possessing a gun is viewed by many ordinary citizens as their last line of defense against the chaos in society, or at least a means by which to get some respect.[140]

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[137] ELCA, "Social Message on Community Violence" (1994, 2020), 1.
[138] ELCA, "Social Message on Community Violence," 4.
[139] Darrell A.H. Miller, "The Expressive Second Amendment," in Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, Martha Merill Umphrey, eds, *Guns in Law,* 50, 51.
[140] ELCA, "Social Message on Community Violence," 2.

Some gun owners (although not all) would likely agree with such views. However, the social meaning of guns as any given gun owner articulates it is more nuanced than the ELCA statement seems prepared to admit. After all, these are not the *only* consequences possible. For some, the threat of chaos and the danger of disrespect are real, indeed. For some, this makes them willing to engage the moral stakes of carrying a gun, not because they are oblivious to the dangers, but because they feel a particular duty to do so. They count themselves among those who take the dangers seriously and are prepared to act accordingly. This is something that many denominations, and not just the ELCA, have largely missed.

Similarly, in its 2016 resolution, "Our Call to End Gun Violence," the United Methodist Church draws on the prophet Micah in noting that, "violence, in so many ways, is fueled by fear and self-protection. Iron plows and pruning tools can still be used as weapons. Yet, in Micah's vision, genuine peace and security are given to all people by God once the weapons of violence are transformed." It goes on to emphasize that, "culture as well as weapons will be transformed."[141] This receives further elaboration in a related United Methodist Bible study curriculum, "Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities: Reflections on Gun Violence from Micah 4:1-4." Explicating Micah 4:3 ("He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more…"), it emphasizes that

> the nations will still be armed when God arbitrates between them. The transformation of weapons into instruments of harvesting food occurs after judgments are made in the prophecy. Micah envisions God's judgments as so just that the nations will not simply turn in their weapons of warfare but will actively engage in their transformation; they will undertake the difficult work of beating weapons into agricultural instruments that provide for the welfare of all people. It will require a great deal of specifically human effort to transform weapons into peaceful instruments. God does not collect or transform the weapons...[Moreover] It is intriguing to note that plowshares and pruning hooks can be used as weapons. The transformation that occurs, then, is not only in the weapons but in those who wield them. It is a holistic and total transformation, not a temporary one. The

[141] United Methodist Church Book of Resolutions, "Our Call to End Gun Violence."

> purpose of these instruments changes as the peoples' focus transforms from self-centered violence to all-centered welfare…A new culture, a new way of peaceful co-existence and reconciliation for all, will be established.[142]

For the Methodists, Micah's focus on "the nations" broadens the conversation, and they seek to put US gun violence in the context of global arms trafficking, UN peacekeeping, even as the majority of specific calls to action emphasize changes to US gun laws (such as universal background checks, minimum age for gun purchase or possession, banning of large-capacity ammunition magazines, etc.).[143] That said, perhaps a more fundamental observation is that they have placed gun violence in the context of warfare, a connection they leave largely unexplained, except for a general observation that "there is a gap between prophesied dreams of the Kingdom and the present violent reality. What do future visions of peace mean for a very violent present?"[144]

In this respect, the statement seems less directed at engaging US "gun culture," which is to say, a tradition of arms ownership and use with complex values and meanings for those who participate in it. Rather, it seems to see peace-making in all its forms as different expressions of the same fundamental project, although it is not "anti-gun" in a simplistic sense, since it seems to call for better regulation of guns rather than, for example, repeal of the Second Amendment (which no mainline denominations currently emphasize).[145] Theologically, it engages the notion of God's judgement (which makes transformation possible) and human effort by way of response, not only to beat weapons into "agricultural implements," but in moving from "self-centered violence to all-centered welfare." The point, of course, is not to distinguish "self-centered" violence from any other

[142] United Methodist Church Office of Church and Society, "Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities: Reflections on Gun Violence from Micah 4:1-4," (2017), 17-18. https://www.umcjustice.org/documents/37. Accessed 30 November 2022.
[143] United Methodist Church, "Our Call to End Gun Violence." It is difficult to know how truly global in outlook the statement seeks to be, given that its allusions to global violence are limited relative to the level of detail and nuance it seeks to offer with regard to US gun violence.
[144] United Methodist Church, "Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities," 9.
[145] Notably, in 1975, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote in "Handgun Violence: A Threat to Life": "…[W]e believe that in the long run and with few exceptions (i.e., police officers, military use), handguns should be eliminated from our society." https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm. Accessed 9 May 2022.

kind, but to suggest that violence is inherently self-centered—a failure to live up to God's call to pursue "all-centered welfare."

Also thinking along broadly "cultural" lines, as early as 1994, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops noted,

> we must affirm and protect all life, especially the most vulnerable in our midst. Likewise, we cannot ignore the underlying cultural values that help to create the environment where violence grows: a denial of right and wrong, education that ignores fundamental values, an abandonment of personal responsibility, an excessive and selfish focus on personal desires, a diminishing sense of obligation to our children and neighbors, a misplaced priority on acquisitions, and media glorification of violence and sexual irresponsibility…Fundamentally, our society needs a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence with a renewed ethic of justice, responsibility and community."[146]

Narrowly, they are somewhat clearer than were the Methodists in articulating a connection between war in general and U.S. gun violence, arguing "No nation on earth, *except those in the midst of war*, has as much violent behavior as we do – in our homes, on our televisions, and in our streets."[147] Their point is not that America is a literal war zone, but that it is not—which (they suggest) makes the ubiquity of gun violence all the more troubling. At first, this seems like a significant attempt to broaden the conversation around guns, recognizing how gun violence must be understood as one expression of a much more complex situation. Indeed, the bishops have been prolific on the issue of handguns since the mid 70s and have drawn connections between gun violence and a range of other issues, keeping the complexity and interrelatedness of social issues squarely in view.[148]

That said, their attention to "underlying cultural values" in "Confronting a Culture of Violence" is curious in some ways. They describe the culture to which they point as a broader environment within which "violence grows," a problem for which, variously, "right and wrong," "fundamental values" and "personal responsibility" are lifted up as solutions. In a list otherwise enumerating crime statistics, domestic gun ownership rates, children

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[146] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action," 7, 9.
[147] USCCB, "Confronting a Culture of Violence," 4. My italics.
[148] Again, see "Handgun Violence: A Threat to Life" (1975), as well as "New Slavery, New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse" (1990) and "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice" (2000).

killed by guns, and violence in the media, the bishops conclude "We must never forget that the violence of abortion has destroyed more than 30 million unborn children since 1972."[149] It seems as if, in their judgment, gun violence is symptomatic of other, larger problems. As they emphasize in the document's conclusion,

> we oppose lawlessness of every kind. Society cannot tolerate an ethic which uses violence to make a point, settle grievances or get what we want. But the path to a more peaceful future is found in a rediscovery of personal responsibility, respect for human life and human dignity, and a recommitment to social justice. The best antidote to violence is hope. People with a stake in society do not destroy communities.[150]

Yet it is unclear how such a statement might read in the context of Gun Culture 2.0 and its "developing culture of armed citizenship" as described by sociologist David Yamane (see page 45)**.**[151] For example, the bishops' opposition to "lawlessness" and their emphasis on "rediscovery of personal responsibility" are open to multiple – and perhaps selective – interpretations. As we have seen, NRA President Charlton Heston has argued for "traditional family units, cops who're on your side, clergy who aren't kooky, safe schools, certain punishment, manageable conflict."[152] His vision is emphatically one of "people with a stake in society" (although along the lines he suggests) working together to promote its flourishing. With that in mind, how the bishops might articulate the connection between some version of a "culture of armed citizenship" and the broader "culture of violence" (of which gun violence is, in their view, only one expression) is difficult to discern. Yet it seems as if the two are not simply synonymous.

This distinction becomes clearer in their more recent document, "Responses to the Plague of Gun Violence" (2019), which contains a striking passage calling for empathy, not simply for the victims of gun violence, but also for the perpetrators. Acknowledging how perpetrators can also be responding to their own experiences of suffering, and to a broader culture of violence, by committing violence themselves, they write as follows:

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[149] USCCB, "Confronting a Culture of Violence," 5.
[150] USCCB, "Confronting a Culture of Violence," 26.
[151] David Yamane, "What's Next? Understanding and Misunderstanding America's Gun Culture" in Craig Hovey and Lisa Fisher, eds., *Understanding America's Gun Culture*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 161.
[152] Charlton Heston, *The Courage to be Free*. (Kansas City: Saudade Press, 2000), 172, 188, as quoted in Craig Rood, *After Gun Violence: Deliberation and Memory in an Age of Political Gridlock*. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 67. (See page 41.)

> At the heart of this epidemic, there is a shooter. This shooter [was] somehow, in some way, turned inwards on pain, or isolation, or illusions, [such] that it became possible to become desensitized to others, losing all empathy…What we need to be looking for are the early signs of self-inwardness and loss of empathy. As a society, we have become less and less empathetic ourselves – a clear sign that, somehow, we are all becoming dangerous. The loss of empathy is a sign that the Lord himself saw in each of us, and one of the reasons He died for us on the cross – to show us what genuine empathy, genuine love for others, truly looks like…That is the kind of empathy our country needs to restore in all her people. And it starts with us. It starts with each of us looking out for those who are *on the peripheries* of our society, those who seem so isolated and angry, and welcoming them back into the fold so they can be healed by the love of others.[153]

The immediate context the bishops have in view is mass shootings, which account for only a small percentage of U.S. gun deaths each year (see page 11).[154] However, they are also making a larger point. Particularly in contrast to gun advocates such as Charlton Heston, the bishops move past a simple opposition of good guys and bad guys, suggesting that the catastrophic loss of personal empathy represented by mass shooters might be more a difference of degree in a society that is also "becoming less and less empathetic." That shooters are themselves "on the peripheries" (as the bishops particularly emphasize) needs sustained attention, in their view. The problem is not as simple as the shooters' lack of empathy, but also our own, as "somehow, we are all becoming dangerous."

It is here that they refuse any simple distinction between the culture of armed citizenship from the culture of violence it claims to resist. By way of response, they call for a kind of watching, "looking out for those on the peripheries," which they seem to imagine, not as defensive monitoring, but rather as an expression of collective care undertaken as an

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[153] UCCB, "Responses to the Plague of Gun Violence," 6-7. Italics in original.

[154] Perhaps Darrell A.H. Miller's point about guns as "symbols as well as instruments" (see page 65 in this chapter) may suggest a similar distinction within incidents of gun violence: that the social meaning of particular tragedies operates distinctively from aggregate statistics. While this may be somewhat obvious, it bears mention that what makes an incident "symbolic" as opposed to merely tragic is a complex question. Related questions that must be asked include "symbolic of what?" and "for whom?" To some extent, the symbolism of mass shootings seems to involve outbreaks of gun violence, not only with multiple victims, but in places where guns are not "to be expected." (Though again, it is important to ask "by whom?") By contrast, "symbolic" incidents of gun violence against Black people, at least as described by Black participants in this study, often focus on a single victim and can be framed as random, yet in a deeper sense, at the same time all too familiar. In the present context, the bishops' emphasis on mass shootings as the center of the "epidemic" may be foregrounding white experiences and ways of defining gun violence.

expression of love of neighbor, and not in the name of "our" safety and care, but rather in solidarity with all. In the bishops' terms, the peripheries and the pain that can experienced from such locations, experiencing oneself as "Other," find many different expressions.

More immediately, the USCCB's call to watch the peripheries helps to uncover some of the notable silences in other denominational statements—even when they call for solidarity. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention's 2018 resolution against gun violence notes that "Gun violence perpetrated against innocent persons is incompatible with the character of Jesus Christ," resolving that the messengers to the convention

> express solidarity to the victimized…and seek every available opportunity to minister to them…and commend the heroism of police officers, first responders, and bystanders *who bravely intervene in violent situations to eliminate additional threats* and provide emergency aid to victims (Romans 13:7).[155]

It goes on to call for government at all levels to "implement preventative measures" to reduce gun violence and mass shootings, "while operating in accordance with the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution." On a more individual level, the resolution affirms that "gun ownership carries with it a great responsibility of being aware of the sinfulness of one's own heart…" and "that it is the depravity, sinfulness, and wickedness of the human heart that gives birth to gun violence and mass shootings."[156] It seems to suggest that empathy is more properly directed toward – and indirectly, limited to – victims and to responders, rather than further extended toward those "turned inwards on pain, on isolation, or illusions," as the bishops describe. Indeed, the SBC's call to conscience is not a collective one or a summons to love of neighbor, but points to searching one's own heart and grappling with the ongoing pull of sin. Notably, even its call to collective work to reduce gun violence is qualified by affirmation of the individual right to bear arms. In this sense, the resolution is broadly consistent with a culture of armed citizenship and generally supportive of armed response to a culture of violence. That broader culture of violence is

[155] Southern Baptist Convention 2018, Resolution 8, my italics. Romans 13:7 reads: "Discharge your obligations to everyone; pay tax and levy, reverence and respect, to those to whom they are due." (REB)
[156] Ibid.; By contrast, the PC(USA) argues: "Our understanding of the fullness of God's peace is larger than definitions of freedom that focus on the possession of weapons…We are already part of the movement of God's people through history toward the promised realm of peace." PC(USA), "Gun Violence, Gospel Values," 6.

the focus of the resolution, even as it acknowledges the "great responsibility" that individual gun ownership must also require. Its othering is subtle—as we suggested before, suggested more in the resolution's silences. It seems focused on moments when violence erupts in the mainstream, rather than on where such violence comes from. There is no "who" associated with those events. If violence comes from "the depravity, sinfulness, and wickedness of the human heart," then there is something almost irredeemable about such hearts, yet the resolution offers no guidance beyond a call to ensure that one's own heart is not like that.

More to the point, how might such a perspective be interpreted as calling on faithful people to live? What does it look like in practice? As we saw in Chapter One (see pages 17-18), a commitment to hospitality can find itself under tremendous duress in a culture of fear. The language of "threat" is notable here. But with that in mind, how might such a statement understand the presence of strangers, whose hearts are particularly unknown? Moreover, aside from its strenuous caution about the potential for wickedness in one's own heart, it offers no guidance for how to identify, much less address that wickedness. This bears mention here, less as a critique of the SBC resolution, but again, because it stands in certain contrast to the USCCB's statement, which emphasize solidarity and the possibility of mutual recognition.

The Formal Theology of Armed Citizenship

What emerges, then, is that the denominations do not actively engage with participants in the culture of armed citizenship, even though they acknowledge aspects of that culture in various ways and seek to grapple with it. As we have seen, they tend to emphasize the tragedy of gun violence and name armed citizenship as a response that compounds that tragedy, looking to a combination of changes of heart and shifts in policy (at long last made possible by those changes of heart) to dismantle the structures that allow guns to flourish**.** We have also underscored how directive the statements can be, inviting (indeed urging) participation in the work of studying and acting "to heed God's call

to prevent gun violence."[157] However, they seem to make little provision for including gun owners in the processes of discernment they imagine.

Alternately, a handful of pastors and scholars have attempted to articulate theological rationales for armed citizenship. For example, in a thoughtful early essay critiquing pacifism, Richard Mouw observes that

> many of us are not pacifists. We believe that governments have been invested by God with the legitimate authority to use the sword in both the internal policing of the affairs of nations and in the defense of nations against external enemies. We also believe there are circumstances in which citizens are justified in wielding the sword against their own governments, when those governments have become agents of systematic oppression. Furthermore, we believe that it is permissible—perhaps even obligatory on occasion—for Christian citizens to participate in these violent activities…[T]here are some of us who prefer to think that some Christian acts of violence are legitimate exercises of Christian discipleship.[158]

As he sees it, violence is not a rejection of peace-making, *tout court*, but is "on occasion morally justified." This extends to more local forms of defense as well:

> When we think of situations in which innocent neighbors are being brutally oppressed, and in which it is possible for us to put an end to this oppression only by violent means, many of us are included to insist on the need for violent intervention. And we believe that these inclinations are shared by authentically Christian sensitivities—sensitivities which are shared by others whom we believe to possess sanctified consciences.[159]

As he argues, "the real debate, properly understood, is about the most fitting strategies for peace-making…The question…cannot be separated from crucial questions about the kinds of lives we are called to live."[160] He seems to suggest that violence may be necessary in some situations as an expression of neighbor love—perhaps even the only option.

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[157] Once again, see PC(USA), "Gun Violence, Gospel Values," 19.

[158] Richard J. Mouw, "Christianity and Pacifism," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (April 1985), 106; notably, Mouw might likely revisit some of his language here in light of the US Capitol riot on January 6, 2021. In a 2021 panel for the Center for Public Justice, Mouw disavows that violence but calls for empathy about the sense of dislocation and dispossession that might have motivated many of the rioters. For example, see https://www.mavismoon.com/blog/exhausted-majority. Accessed 3 December 2022. He was also a signatory on the letter "Say 'No' to Christian Nationalism: Condemning Christian Nationalism's Role in the January 6th Insurrection." https://saynotochristiannationalism.org/#signers. Accessed 3 December 2022.

[159] Mouw, "Christianity and Pacifism," 109.

[160] *Ibid*., 107, 109.

Rodney J. Decker agrees: "At times it is necessary to use violence to stop or prevent violence. This may be more obvious at the national/international level, but it is also true at the personal level."[161] He pays particular attention to Luke 22, Jesus' admonition to the disciples to purchase a sword, criticizing the *eisegesis* of pacifist readings that insist Jesus must have been speaking metaphorically:

> There is an alternate understanding…that makes much better sense...Jesus may well be preparing his followers to travel some dangerous roads…In doing so, Christian have just as much right to defend themselves against highway robbers as anyone else.[162]

This anticipates an explicitly premillennialist perspective that requires acceptance of the fact that "we do not live in a perfect society and will not do so until Jesus returns and establishes his kingdom. In the meantime, we must live as God commands and be prepared to face the realities of an imperfect society."[163] For Decker, pacifism is hopelessly utopian, as opposed to the "realistic, ultimate hope of perfect society within history" that can only be known after the *eschaton*. Yet in the meantime, "the solution to violence is not 'peace' or nonresistance, for that simply makes greater space for the evil doer to do evil."[164]

That said, it is not entirely clear to whom Decker is responding. As we have seen, the mainline denominational statements tend to focus on tightening restrictions on *illegal* guns and to focus on broad calls to reduce violence—particularly by making a commitment to repentance for their inaction. Yet the denominational statements are not pacifist. However, they do have a different perspective on governmental authority. For Decker, this is a stark choice. As he writes,

> the opportunity for mass violence has increased considerably. Whether that results in terrorists flying airplanes into skyscrapers or the murder of multiple people in a public setting, the resulting fear has greatly affected our society. There are, so far as I know, only two reactions possible [to the violence of the world] (other than wringing one's hands and doing nothing). Either the people demand that the government attempt to protect them from all possible calamities and accept the

[161] Rodney J. Decker, "Self-Defense and the Christian," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 18, no. 1., (September 2014), 55.
[162] Decker, "Self-Defense and the Christian," 39.
[163] *Ibid.*, 57-58.
[164] *Ibid*., 55.

> resulting loss of liberty that entails, or the people must take greater responsibility for their own protection.[165]

The denominational statements seek to participate in a conversation about what can and should be done in the face of violence, a conversation that Decker seems to see as largely beside the point, since for him to call to greater responsibility is the only realistic, and as he sees it, faithful option.

Writing about Matthew 26:52 ("Put your sword back in its place. For those who live by the sword will perish by the sword"), Wayne Grudem notes,

> it is interesting that Peter, who had been traveling with Jesus regularly for three years, was carrying a sword! People carried swords at that time for self-defense against robbers and others who would do them harm, and Jesus *apparently* had not taught them that it was wrong…In addition, Jesus did not tell Peter to give his sword away or throw it away, but "Put your sword back into its place…It was *apparently* right for Peter to continue carrying it…."[166]

Like Decker's proposal of "an alternate understanding that…makes much better sense," Grudem's reading seems less precisely historical than inferential (as his use of the word "apparently" may suggest). Similarly, it leads Grudem to affirm "the right to self-defense" as if others were seeking to contest it. He particularly affirms it as "especially important for women, for the elderly, and for any others who might be less able to defend themselves from an attack or who might appear to be more vulnerable to an attack."[167]

This bears mentioning because it seems to imagine vulnerabilities differently, and to highlight different vulnerabilities than the denominational statements generally do. Grudem does not acknowledge a Biblical call to seek peace in the face of a larger "culture of violence," even as he advocates for the broad terms of what is essentially the "culture of

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[165] Ibid., 48.

[166] Wayne A. Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource For Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 194-195. My italics. Similarly, writing on Luke 22:36 ("And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one"), Timothy Hsiao writes: "Two swords would not have been enough for all of them. But Jesus does not say that the swords were enough for all of them. He just says, 'it is enough.' Enough for who?...The sufficiency being expresses is that of meeting an individual's need. Jesus may have been saying that the specific disciples who brought him the swords were each sufficiently armed, or he may have referred to the swords as examples of what each disciple should have….However we render it, the overall context clearly indicated self-defense." See Timothy Hsiao, "Does Jesus Endorse Armed Self-Defense in Luke 22:36?" *Evangelical Quarterly* (2021), Vol. 92, Issue 4, 354.

[167] Grudem, *Politics*, 210.

armed citizenship." While emphatically principled, his interest is in the connection between principles and rights, yet notably without engagement of potential consequences or ways of reckoning moral cost. This is decidedly different than how the denominational statements work. When the ELCA notes that "possessing a gun is viewed by many ordinary citizens as their last line of defense against the chaos in society," it is engaging in a mild form of lamentation.[168] Further, it seeks to take account of those who might be vulnerable because they arouse (potentially lethal) suspicion. By contrast, Grudem's work focuses exclusively on those "vulnerable to attack." He does not seem to ask the "cultural" questions of how invulnerability is imagined or pursued.

Culture Warriors and Guns

In addition to the more traditional channels of denominational and academic theology, there is also an emerging conversation about the relationship between God and guns from politically conservative Christians. Found in blogs and podcasts such as "The Armed Lutheran" and "The God and Guns Podcast," as well as self-published books made available online or via Amazon.com, they seek to offer resources for Christian gun owners, particularly around proper interpretation of Scripture and the "natural rights" of owning guns.[169] The overall tenor of these resources is suggested by Lloyd R. Bailey, host of "The Armed Lutheran" podcast (and a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod pastor in Texas), who has written a series of reflections on key Bible verses, "each one carefully reviewed by a Lutheran pastor who puts the verse in proper context to help you respond when you see these verses misused in arguments over the Second Amendment."[170] His broader commitments are clear:

[168] ELCA, "Social Message on Community Violence," 2.
[169] "The Armed Lutheran" is particularly notable for its publication's logo, which presents the traditional "Luther rose" flanked by the barrels of two Colt .45 pistols, with the familiar Lutheran rallying cry "Here I stand" between them. The connection between Luther's famous statement and "Stand Your Ground" laws seems inevitable. The website describes the program as "a weekly podcast about guns, hunting, competitive shooting, the natural right of self-defense, and what God's Word says about the issues surrounding gun rights and gun ownership." See http://www.armedlutheran.us/. Accessed 6 December 2022. See also the "God and Guns Podcast" site, https://firearmsradio.net/category/podcasts/god-and-guns/. Accessed 6 December 2022.
[170] Lloyd R. Bailey, Jr., ed. *Duty to Defend: Defending God's Word From Those Who Misuse It In the Gun-Rights Debate*. (Celina, TX: Armed Lutheran Media Company, 2020), 8.

> [P]rogressive Christian churches in America have rejected Biblical truth in favor of woke social justice concerns like transgenderism, homosexuality, abortion rights, and gun control. And, more often than not, those who write at progressive Christian websites or preach at progressive churches rarely make arguments from Scripture, opting for politics instead. Occasionally, though, you will still find those who twist God's Word to promote the leftist cause *du jour*…As my good friend and co-host, Pastor John Bennett puts it, this is simply taking your preferred political ideology and "sprinkling Jesus on it."[171]

While it is difficult to ascertain for whom Bailey may be understood to speak, it is worth noting that the "chaos in society" (to quote the ELCA) that he protests is presented as the moral chaos sown by the progressive churches, specifically, rather than chaos inherent in violence itself. His words are, of course, also reminiscent of Charlton Heston's at the NRA, quoted in Chapter Two (see page 40), which present gun ownership as simply one expression of a larger, common sensical, or self-proclaimed vision of the normal, to which the nation desperately needs to return. He is also clearly rejecting the kind of public theology that the denominational statements are attempting to do around guns.

Somewhat more irenic in spirit, the Society of St. Gabriel Possenti is a Roman Catholic lay society that is seeking to have the 19th century Italian saint designated as the official "Patron Saint of Handgunners," drawing on a legend from Possenti's life in which he defended a small Italian village against violence at the hands of furloughed soldiers from Garibaldi's army (fighting against the Pope during the unification of modern Italy). Arguing that formal recognition of his patronage would "be a most significant apostolic gesture," the society notes that

> with perhaps hundreds of millions of handguns in the possession of private citizens throughout the world, it behooves the Church to hold up a sterling example of the good way in which these firearms can and should be used…In recent years, it is true, handguns, handgun ownership, handgun laws and handgun use have become topics of ongoing controversy…Perhaps, for one thing, people in general, including some church officials, are not aware of just how many decent people own handguns.[172]

That appeal to decency and to guidance of the Church for an "example of the good way in which these firearms can and should be used" is worth noting, although the author of *Gun Saint*, John Michael Snyder, makes clear that American bishops and the Vatican remain far

[171] Bailey, et al., *Duty to Defend*, 6-7.
[172] John Michael Snyder, *Gun Saint*. (Arlington, VA: Telum Associates, 2003), 20.

from convinced about the propriety of such patronage. Writing about Possenti, David B. Kopel notes no fewer than 30 current patron saints for everything from ammunition magazines and workers, armorers, artillery gunners, swordsmiths, and hunters, not to mention knights, soldiers and military orders—the Church's reluctance is perhaps less obvious than it might initially seem.[173]

Far more pointedly, Greg Perry opens his self-published *God & Guns: Why I am Not a Pacifist—Defend Your Family! Kill Your Attackers in Christian Love*, with a strongly gendered diatribe, emphasizing not continuity and "normality," but just the opposite:

> I am an abnormal Christian…At least abnormal in *today's* world when compared to most. Just as home-educated students today are abnormal compared to those who graduate from the government schools who can't read or understand their own diplomas. I am abnormal because I am sick of female run churches, the girly "Christian" men who wouldn't be able to defend the faith with Scripture any better than they can defend their wives when they are attacked. I'm ready for some real and Godly men to lead once again…I'm ready for some real and Godly men who have absolutely no problems with the self-defense principles God lays out in the Bible. If "love your enemies" is your brain-dead idea of how a man should behave when your children are attacked, I wish you nothing but the misery you deserve.[174]

Perry presents this as a reading of Scripture in context, from which common-sensical, traditional values and societal roles must clearly flow. However, how such attitudes shape gun owners' understanding of their practice is difficult to say. In any case, it may well be that Christian gun owners are developing and revising their practices in terms of three related but distinct "cultures," rather than simply one understanding of culture: they are navigating within and between the culture of violence, the culture of armed citizenship, and the culture wars.

Critical Lenses for Tracking Theologies of American Christian Gun Owners

As we have seen, there are many ways that denominations and theologians (both academic and non-academic) seek to speak to the problem of gun violence and to argue for the proper place of guns in American society. Some also speak to gun owners and/or for

[173] David B. Kopel, *The Morality of Self-Defense and Military Action: The Judeo-Christian Tradition*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 350-1

[174] Greg Perry, *God & Guns: Why I am Not a Pacifist—Defend Your Family! Kill Your Attackers in Christian Love*. (No Place of Publication: Greg Perry, 2014), 7-8. Author's italics.

them. But I would argue that exploring gun owners' theologies in their complexity is especially important if we are to understand Christian gun ownership beyond general references to one expression of "culture" or another. Clearly, culture is relevant. However, with more than one type of culture at work, it is not enough to suggest the ways that "culture" might seem to be operating. How individual practices become theological and the role that theologies then have on revising and refining practices must always be understood as the complex interweaving of those cultures. With that in mind, I will offer a presentation and a brief discussion of four key frameworks from Christian ethics that work together to deepen and enrich our reading of the voices of Christian gun owners. The first is the "responsibility ethics" of H. Richard Niebuhr, particularly from his posthumous work *The Responsible Self*; the second is David Hollenbach's reflection on the Common Good; the third is work of several womanist and feminist theologians, including Traci West, M. Shawn Copeland, Emilie Townes; and finally, the work of Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, who has written the most important work on gun violence and theology to date.

Tracking "responsibility"

Published posthumously in 1963, H. Richard Niebuhr's "Responsible Self" offers the sketch of what was to be a much more substantial work in Christian Ethics that Niebuhr had planned to undertake in retirement. From the perspective of Practical Theology as a discipline, Niebuhr is an unsung but significant forerunner who sought to combine sociological analysis with theological reflection, and who had a particular interest in the relationship between the Church (as a concrete institution and as a theological concept) and the world. For Niebuhr, the practices of church communities and the role in shaping the world outside the church provided an important window into the way in which the church's values functioned (for good or ill), and at a greater remove, how God might be said to be working through (or despite) the efforts of believers. As he saw it, ethics traditionally fell into one of two broad categories: accounts of "man-the-maker," his title for teleological approaches; and "man-the-citizen," which represented deontological ones. He found both lacking. Man-the-maker, he felt, suggested that in the end, the work of human existence was "…in all…working on selves—our own selves or our companions," an account that

emphasized personal agency and a form of universality that Niebuhr found descriptively inadequate and unconvincing.[175] Man-the-citizen, he argued, conceived "the self in its agency as legislative, obedient, and administrative," and offered a framework "to find guidance in the making of complex decisions," but tended to a kind of myopic attention to means over ends. Neither was adequate in the face of human suffering. "Because suffering is the exhibition of the presence in our existence of that which is not under our control, or of the intrusion into our self-regulating existence of an activity operating under another law than ours, it cannot be brought adequately within the spheres" of either approach.[176]

A fuller answer was to conceive of "man-the-answerer," *homo dialogicus*. He continues, "yet it is in the response to suffering that many and perhaps all men, individually and in their groups, define themselves, take on character, and develop their ethos. And their responses are functions of their interpretation of what is happening to them as well as of the action upon them."[177] With that in mind, he says that the focus cannot be simply either on what is the highest good (teleology) or right (deontology), but rather on what is "fitting," the action "that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response…."[178]

As Ellen Ott Marshall explains, this was a theme that his earlier work had long anticipated. It is also fundamentally religious in nature. Reading Niebuhr's early essay, "Theology in an Age of Disillusionment," she notes his claim that "in times of disillusionment, one discovers that he or she had placed trust in someone or something that was unable to sustain that trust."[179] This provokes a shift in our center of value which might well lead us to authentic religious faith. However, it might not do so. "After this disillusionment," she notes, "the person flounders, placing trust in a variety of gods. This is the move from henotheism to polytheism," terms important to Niebuhr throughout his career, especially in his *Radical Monotheism* (1963)**,** pointing, respectively, to trust in a

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[175] H. Richard Niebuhr. *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. Library of Theological Ethics. Reprint. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 51.
[176] Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 60.
[177] Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 60.
[178] Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 61.
[179] Ellen Ott Marshall. *Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom: Toward a Responsible Theology of Christian Hope*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 84.

fundamentally inadequate center of value or to trusting in a variety of centers simultaneously, however contradictory and illusory this might prove. "If resolution comes, it comes because the One is located beyond the many, the ultimate source of confidence, trust, and loyalty."[180]

For Niebuhr, it was in pursuing the "fittingness" of one's response to life—and particularly its challenges—that one's proper agency emerges, aware of values higher than one's own and greater than oneself but attuned to the constant power of illusion and self-deception. He recognizes practical duty and pursuit of the good, means and ends, as both significant, yet also unfolding constantly within individual lives. As Niebuhr elaborates, "in our responsibility we attempt to answer the question: 'what shall I do?' by raising as the prior question: 'what is going on?' or 'what is being done to me?' rather than 'what is my end?' or 'what is my ultimate law?'"[181]

It also places questions of accountability at its center. Again, selves can emerge only in response to circumstances, and within those, to the prior actions of other selves. Fittingness is not simply "response," but a response that anticipates further responses. Who will respond? In what ways? With what consequences? These are all central questions for Niebuhr. Thus, he foregrounds questions such as: for whom am I responsible? To whom am I responsible? And finally, to what moral community do I belong (in order to reflect critically on my own understanding)?

The Common Good

David Hollenbach's work on the common good provides an additional lens through which to consider the theological reflection of American Christian gun owners. This is particularly true of the opening chapters of his *Common Good and Christian Ethics*, which make the case for the importance of a robust concept of the common good, in part by describing the likely consequences for a society that understands itself as living without one. Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer and others, Hollenbach makes the case that actually doing so is not possible – that human existence is too

[180] Marshall, *Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom*, 85.
[181] Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 63.

fundamentally interdependent to permit even individual life without some form of ongoing collective agreement, even if it results in a fundamentally misshapen and diminished form of life together. When used as a lens to ponder guns in society, Hollenbach's description of life without a notion of the common good sounds very much like the perspective Carlson identified in her Michigan "citizen protectors." For example, Hollenbach notes,

> when fear of…threats sets the tone, interaction with people who are different is perceived as a danger to be avoided. Serious interaction and mutual vulnerability can seem like a "common bad" than a good to be shared in common. Defense of one's turf becomes the first requirement of a good life…a positive experience of life together, common knowledge of what a good life is, and the philosophical idea of the common good all seem to evanesce together.[182]

He goes on to note the "downward spiral" in which differences lead to conflict, then fear, resulting in additional conflict, boundary keeping, and a hardening of perceived differences.[183] For Hollenbach, such dynamics call powerfully into question the viability of a certain forms of secular political thinking that emphasize the rights of individuals and articulate the fundamental purpose of government as securing those rights. Such thinking, he suggests, depends on an inadequate form of mutual obligation between members of society, one based on tolerance or simply putting up with one another, rather than on following a deeper call to cultivate lives of genuine mutual concern, or even recognize such bonds as a positive good in themselves.

This is a powerful addition to Niebuhr's notion of responsibility, which again, is to be seen as a dual expression of how lives are lived and understood "in response" to the world and of how obligations are understood within those lives. For Niebuhr, the call to love of neighbor in an ever-expanding circle of responsibility was fundamental to the gospel. However, Hollenbach might well caution that proper responsiveness and obligation can only emerge when the fundamentally *interdependent* nature of human existence is acknowledged. Individuals surely do respond to the world they encounter. Likewise, most feel some sense of duty toward (some) others, as well as accountability to someone for how they acquit themselves in light of that duty. Yet such lives are far from collective—truly

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[182] David Hollenbach,SJ, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18.

[183] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 21.

neighborly—in the deepest sense, for the mutuality that marks genuine solidarity between persons need not be operative. The decision to own and perhaps to carry a gun is typically described in terms of the objective proximity of potential threats—less a choice, as such, than a kind of bow to (a dangerous) reality, and moreover, as an expression of *agency* in the face of that reality.

Yet for Hollenbach, solidarity reframes and qualifies that agency in many ways. For example, in describing the context of the urban poor, he observes, "whatever agency [the poor] have is limited to figuring out how to cope with the social conditions that are the results of decisions made elsewhere."[184] Responding to social conditions by, for example, carrying a gun, is "responsible," narrowly speaking; yet it lacks the broader connection to others that Hollenbach will describe as the common good in the deepest sense. As he argues, "the classic right to freedom of religion, speech, association and assembly are not primarily rights to be left alone. Rather, they are persons' moral claims to be treated as participating members of society…[They are] primarily positive social empowerments rather than simply negative civil immunities from coercion."[185] The right to bear arms is, preeminently, articulated as a right "to be left alone," and as we have seen, the Second Amendment's language of bearing arms as a right that "shall not be infringed" is routinely used to assert "negative civil immunities from coercion" with regard to legally carrying a gun itself. Yet this is devoid of the larger social purpose that Hollenbach understands as the true function of such rights. By this logic, carrying a gun is a form of coping, to be sure, but not an expression of engaged, indeed responsible, citizenship in a truly mutual way. In fact, it is a form of giving in to the "common bad" that will likely only make fear and division that much more intractable. He cautions, "When a society not only falls short of the level of solidarity it could reasonably aspire to but is shaped by institutions that exclude some members from agency altogether, the resulting interdependence becomes a genuine evil."[186]

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[184] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 185.

[185] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 160-1.

[186] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 189.

Of course, gun rights supporters might well argue that such a claim offers a powerful justification of expanded access to guns. After all, as many gun activists have claimed, "an armed society is a polite society."[187] Yet this is an impoverished form of the agency Hollenbach is imagining, more clearly dedicated to securing a vast array of individual private goods rather than to securing and extending the "mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being."[188] By contrast, his understanding of obligation is far more extensive. Drawing on the work of Thomas Aquinas, he makes a distinction between three kinds of justice, which he understands as "a set of minimal requirements of the solidarity that is a prerequisite for lives lived in dignity."[189] These are: commutative, contributive, and distributive justice, respectively: individual or group obligations to specific persons; individual contribution to a broader, collective, common good; and how members of society share in the benefits made possible by life together.[190] Such precision permits a new level of specificity in how Christian gun owners evaluate their practice. For Hollenbach, the disparities within society, which he identifies as visible in the abandonment of the cities by the wealthier suburban communities that surround them, speak to the deep inequities informing individual understanding of contributive and distributive justice, in particular. The distributive injustice of benefits relative to each community is further compounded by the contributive injustice of how people use (or withhold) their agency on behalf of others.

Womanist Perspectives

Broadly speaking, Womanist theology and theological ethics are traditions of reflection that seek to foreground the perspectives and experiences of Black women on matters of faith. Building on the Black liberationist theology of James Cone and others,

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[187] The quotation is widely available on merchandise available online, including t-shirts, bumper stickers, and mugs. For a thoughtful response to its attribution from Robert A. Heinlein's novel, *Beyond This Horizon* (1942), see Mark Sumner, "'An Armed Society is a Polite Society is a Call for More Gun Violence, Not Less," *Daily Kos* (September 2, 2019). https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2019/9/2/1881430/--An-armed-society-is-a-polite-society-is-a-call-for-more-gun-violence-not-less. Accessed 28 March 2023.

[188] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 81-82.

[189] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 193.

[190] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 195-197.

Womanists "have pressed for a holistic black theology that integrates race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ecological analyses," emphasizing "the positive experiences of Black women as a basis for doing theology and ethics" as well as "the separation of black women from both the racism of white feminist theologians and the sexism of black male theologians."[191] It is profoundly intersectional and grounded in questions of social location, not only as a way of remaining close to Black women's experiences, but also with implications for traditional theological and ethical method, to which it offers some strong challenges. Thus, while Womanist approaches identify Christian faith as a powerful source of hope and liberation for Black women throughout American history, they also seek to name how questions of privilege continue to operate, both within Christian institutions and the larger discourses that constitute "Christian knowledge" in particular forms. As Emilie Townes has argued,

> rather than argue for universals, womanist ethics begins with particularity...The task of womanist ethics is to recognize the biases within particularity and work with them to discover the rootedness of social location and the demands for faithful reflection and witness in light of the gospel demands for justice and wholeness.[192]

Ethicist Traci West shows some of the power of a Womanist approach through a compelling critical analysis of testimony from Yvonne, a Black woman who was sexually assaulted and whose claims were dismissed both institutionally/legally by the police and more personally by her own grandmother. In a particularly compelling section of her *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, West seeks to determine how "racist filters" are operating, not only in that dual dismissal, but also in how a customary ethical analysis would seek to understand it. "[A] liberative Christian social ethic," she argues, "enhances one's recognition of *the range of interconnected moral concerns* that need to be addressed."[193] She further notes that

> identifying multiple, particular contexts of ethical problems can help to clarify precisely what the work of living out our universal ethical principles involves…Recognizing multiple contexts when crafting ethics can also aid in

[191] Dwight Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present and Future*. (New York and London: Palgrave, 2002), 32, 38.
[192] Emilie Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have" in Cannon et al, *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*. (Louisville, WJK Press, 2011), 36-37.
[193] Traci C. West. *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 68. My italics.

> avoiding a tendency to simplistically assume an oppositional stance to values in the dominant culture, thus diminishing the possibility for genuine accountability and solidarity.[194]

For West, formal ethics can overemphasize binary oppositions. She cautions that "without strategic consideration of multiple contexts, there is a danger of inadvertently appropriating the dominant terms that the culture has set. This danger looms precisely when one rushes to claim values that seem to be at the opposite end of the spectrum…."[195] In the case of Yvonne, West carefully frames a series of potential critical misreadings of a sexual assault, any of which might lead to different types of "conclusions" with regard to its meaning and significance. To claim it has "only universal meaning" (that race is a mere accident) is just as incorrect as claiming that it has "only particular meaning" (such that Yvonne is a mere Other to whom such a "marginal, often pitiable reality" seems to happen, with little to which a better situated self might relate).

Finally, West notes the danger of seeing Yvonne's story through the lens of "universal Christian meaning," in which a theological category such as charity or love of neighbor feeds "a belief in the moral superiority of whiteness and hinders a Christian's ability to recognize his or her own moral culpability in silence about racist practices that sanction rape."[196] Similarly, JoAnne Marie Terrell, Jacquelyn Grant and many others have explored how Christian symbolism and theology have been (and continue to be) deployed to oppress Black women. For example, as Terrell explains, long-standing concepts of service or servanthood need to be understood differently in their context. She agrees with Jacquelyn Grant, who has argued that

> Christians, in the interest of fairness and justice, need to reconsider the servant language, for it has been this language that has undergirded much of the human structures that cause pain and suffering for many oppressed peoples. The conditions created were nothing short of injustice and in fact, sin.[197]

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[194] West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 70.
[195] West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 70.
[196] West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 68-70.
[197] Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in Emilie Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 201, as quoted in JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in African-American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 119.

West's approach is important in many ways. With regard to the particular practice of gun-carrying, her work calls attention to any inaccurate "false universal" that might suggest that the race or gender of the carrier is somehow not morally salient – that we are only speaking of individuals and their decisions.

In addition, West's emphasis on "recognizing multiple contexts when crafting ethics" reminds us that the practice of gun-carrying among, for example, women and people of color, needs to be evaluated with nuance. It is tempting, after all, to understand the ethics of gun-carrying as a process of deciding who is "truly" vulnerable – perhaps vulnerable "enough," or under which conditions – to justify the practice, and (among Christians) particularly so in some version of what might be said to be "Christian terms" of one kind or another. West pushes us to interrogate the constructions of normativity at work in such an impulse, even when it may understand its instincts as exculpatory. As noted above, "genuine accountability and solidarity" demand recognizing that different people can participate in the "dominant culture" in different ways and to different extents. How they do so and to what ends are extremely significant questions. Of course, all too often, who decides what is "permitted" remains unaddressed. Furthermore, any generally liberative perspective would seek to engage contextual factors that are larger than one person's specific moral decisions, arguing that without some recognition of those factors, any particular decision cannot be fully understood. Thus, to ask why someone decides to carry a gun yields a certain kind of answer. To see that answer in dialogue with their context—what their world is like and, crucially, *how it got that way*—is central to any development of an adequate ethics.

It is also clear that Womanist ethics has a great deal to say to Niebuhrian "responsibility ethics" and to notions of the Common Good from Catholic Social Teaching. For example, Marcia Y. Riggs has noted how Niebuhrian emphasis on responsibility and "an ethics of the fitting" anticipates in some ways the Womanist commitment to intersectional identity and close attention to context in framing notions of ethical meaning. She writes that, "his synthesis requires us to acknowledge a relationship between the social, the

philosophical and theological, and the historical within ethical thought."[198] That said, she understands Niebuhr as still all-too-grounded in a vision of an "autonomous, rational self," rather than recognizing the full possibility for an ethic of socio-historical selves, and, further yet, of relational ones: "It is relationality, our need and our ability to relate to one another as embodied beings, that is the earmark of what makes us human and thus capable of discerning what the ethical requires us to do."[199] Elsewhere, she writes, "although persons as selves-in-community are individuals who respond individually and personally to God, they know that it is through and within the socio-historic community that they are themselves judged, redeemed, and saved by God's justice while being called as moral agents to respond to acts of oppression."[200] What H.R. Niebuhr articulated as "responsibility to" and "responsibility for" needs to be understood as more than simply the communities that bear on a particular self and inform its choices. Identity itself is more polytheistic (to use a Niebuhrian term) and intersectional—more of a reflection of multiple claims and ways of articulating selfhood. The nature of a self is more relational, with more consequences ethically and personally as a result of those relations than Niebuhr himself may have fully grasped.

Womanist theological ethics also extends a powerful reframing of the Common Good from Catholic Social Teaching. Drawing on Bernard Lonergan's exploration of bias as a kind of blindness, or *scotosis*, M. Shawn Copeland has argued that while racism's most obvious form is a hatred for or a desire to subordinate people of other races, it is also more subtle and multifaceted than just that. She sees it as a complex failure to recognize the dignity and value of others, and especially, to recognize that one aspect of human dignity and value can be physically embodied in or through difference. She is interested in how racism operates as a form of refusal to see, at times consciously, and at others, unconsciously. Moreover, she notes the power of individual as well as group bias, and "the general bias of common sense," which she explains, "regulates social arrangements to the

[198] Marcia Riggs, "Living as Ethical Mediators," in Cannon, et. al., Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press), 248. See also Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), especially 82-90.
[199] Riggs, "Ethical Mediators," 248.
[200] Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act*, 83.

immediate well-being of the dominant racial group [by dismissing the value of other perspectives] and thereby despoils the common good."[201] For Copeland,

> solidarity affirms the interconnectedness of human beings in common creatureliness. Humanity is no mere aggregate of autonomous, isolated individuals. Humanity is one intelligible reality—multiple, diverse, varied and concrete, yet one.[202]

The particular vulnerability of Black bodies, in general, and of the Black female body, in particular, speak to the sinfulness of life under Empire. Bias (in Lonergan's sense) is a failure to see creatureliness properly, in its many expressions. She writes,

> intentional and unintentional structures of white, racially bias-induced horizon replicate and reinforce customary patterns and practices of racial stratification even as racial self-identification grows more fluid, more unpredictable. Yet, even the most creative and most public contestation of those structures, patterns, and practices may deny affirmation, verification, and admiration to "blackness," and thus reinforce "the privilege of violence."[203]

Her emphasis on solidarity, creatureliness, and (elsewhere) a preferential option for the vulnerable, are clearly grounded in Catholic Social Teaching. However, Copeland's emphasis on embodiment suggests the need for clarification (and qualification) about what, precisely, is "common" in "the common good." It is her sense that core faith practices, particularly Eucharist, enact a theological counter-narrative about embodiment in difference as embraced by God, helping the faithful to recognize and claim both their own distinctiveness and their common creatureliness. Willie James Jennings reminds us of how profoundly racialized – and racist – the "Christian imagination" became at the dawn of Western colonialism, particularly in light of chattel slavery.[204] He describes with great precision how Lonergan's "general bias of common sense" was at work as notions of race and creatureliness were both shaped by and then came to shape theological thinking. Implicit in Copeland's work is a deeper critique of how bias influences the Church itself from the life of individual believers up to the Magisterium itself.

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[201] Shawn M. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 14.
[202] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 100.
[203] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 15. "The privilege of violence" comes from Lonergan, *Insight*, xiv.
[204] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. Chapter 2.

Along these lines, it is not clear that the way Catholic Social Teaching has typically spoken of that which is "common" is fully responsive to Womanism's challenge, for example, as we saw in Traci West's work. West urges ethical accounts to address the complexity of contexts, recognizing that these are neither simply universal nor simply particular. Moreover, her suspicion toward even "universal Christian meaning" as a subtle form of Othering seems important in this context. Womanism recognizes the inherent bias at work in decontextualized notions of both "the individual" and "the collective," which seek to shear off salient forms of particularity—or which are blind to those forms, and content to remain so. This is precisely the kind of denial of "affirmation, verification and admiration to 'blackness,'" against which Copeland warns.

More generally, something particularly resonant in the context of this study is Copeland's concern with the relationship between racism – especially in some of its implicit or unconscious expressions – and Lonergan's "privilege of violence." To carry a gun is, in some sense, to claim that privilege. One's blindness to the dignity and value of some, if not others, shapes its exercise in powerful ways. It is not too much to say that one might even understand the decision to carry a gun as a form of service to – perhaps a defense of – others in the very name of the Common Good, or even a practice that embodies some aspect of the Common Good. Yet it seems important to ask if and how blindness might be operating, and the prospect of a Common Good yielding to more particular, contextually-circumscribed expressions of what is good. The ways in which the Good is truly shared seems quite important.

Theological Analysis of Stand-Your-Ground: Kelly Brown Douglas

Working squarely within the Womanist tradition, Kelly Brown Douglas has written one of the most significant theological responses to American gun violence to date, with particular attention to its deeply embedded racism. Prompted by the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012, a young man walking home after going to a local convenience store for a snack, Douglas traces the underlying logic of that tragic encounter, grounding it in long-standing white practices of managing "strong boundaries of race and space that excluded

all others"—and particularly Black bodies.[205] Thus, while "stand your ground" (or "no duty to retreat") refers most immediately to an expansion of the legal right to self-defense that began in Florida in 2005 (and now exists in some form in 38 states), Douglas sees that law as only a recent expression of long-standing metanarratives around belonging, personhood, place and dignity. For example, she argues, "Stand-your-ground culture does its job when it deprives black bodies of the safe space that is home."[206]

Even more significantly, Douglas sees this as a fundamentally *theological* project. She observes, "…America's most cherished property is America's exceptionalism, exerting itself with stand-your-ground culture acting as its shield." Later, she adds,

> it should be no surprise that stand-your-ground culture has been at times employed with deadly force. For one must remember that the war it is carrying out is a religious war. Whether legitimated by the civil or evangelical canopy, it is a war being fought for God.[207]

She builds on the work of Patricia Williams and others to emphasize that the divine liberation in the Book of Exodus, which was such an important theme for the Puritans and others, was also a mandate for conquest and for the erasure of the un-chosen. She reminds us that, at least in human practice, divine providence can have winners and losers, "us" and "them," and moreover, that excluding "them" is often central to how a sense of "us" is constructed and maintained. In fact, that erasure can extend even to the modern language of race itself:

> It is even more difficult to prove when the very laws and tactics that fuel racism avoid the language of race…[I]n this instance, racially sterilized language reveals another right of cherished white property—it has the right to determine what is racist and what is not. Indeed, when black people make such a claim they are the ones "guilty" of racism.[208]

It is in this context that the "counter-narrative" of Black theological resistance emerges, particularly through identification with Jesus:

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[205] Darius D. Hills, review of Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), in *Black Theology*, Vol 14., no. 1, (April 2016), 84-88.
[206] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 22, 131.
[207] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 129.
[208] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 134.

> That Jesus was crucified affirms his absolute identification with the Trayvons, the Jordans, the Renishas, the Jonathans, all the other victims of the stand-your-ground culture war. Jesus' identification with the lynched/crucified class is not accidental. It is intentional. It did not begin with his death on the cross. In fact, that Jesus was crucified signals his prior bond with the 'crucified class' of his day.[209]

For Douglas, this offers a way for Black Christians to affirm their identity and dignity before God and one another despite both the overwhelming matrix of white racism as well as the close connection of many forms of institutional Christianity to that matrix. Further, she finds hope for broader social transformation in the tradition of Black prophetic testimony, represented especially by Martin Luther King, with its call to "moral memory," "moral identity" and "moral participation." By these, she means: acknowledging the presence and power of American exceptionalist myths, affirming the shared humanity of all people, and the shared project of building a better and more just world.[210]

It is worth noting the parallels between Douglas' proposal and the lenses we have suggested in order to bring gun-carrying into theological perspective. Her call for renewed moral memory seeks accounting and accountability, "telling the truth about the past and one's relationship to it," arguing that "the nation will certainly continue to be held captive to [the narrative of exceptionalism] until it honestly confronts it and the history it has created."[211] Douglas' emphasis on moral identity recalls Shawn Copeland's sense of the possibilities in acknowledging a common creatureliness, which Copeland sees as a basis for solidarity across difference that excludes none. Finally, in moral participation, "being the change that is God's heaven," Douglas gives liberative grounding to the work of pursuing the common good, seeing individual participation and agency in the work of seeking one's own flourishing but also that of all people.[212]

In some sense, *Stand Your Ground* makes a suitable pair with sociologist Jennifer Carlson's study of "citizen-protectors" (see pages 52-54)**.** Obviously, Douglas underscores the perspective of the Other who may well be on the receiving end of particular enactments of citizen-protection, and she seeks to assert the humanity and dignity of those on the

[209] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 174.
[210] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 223-225.
[211] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 221.
[212] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 224.

margins. To that end, she contrasts the meaning-making work of white American exceptionalist theologies versus theologies of liberation grounded in the Black church tradition. Douglas does not engage sociology and Carlson does not engage religion, much less theology; nevertheless, they leave connections there to be drawn. Following their lead, surely, a *Christian* citizen-protector could be imagined as one of any number of possible figures. One might be grounded uncritically in a theology of American exceptionalism, operating out of a powerful sense of policing and maintaining "strong boundaries of race and space." Carlson's sense of the economic and cultural instability challenging the identities of many gun owners seems to point to the ongoing role of exceptionalist metanarratives in identifying what seems to be in jeopardy and how it might be safeguarded. Alternatively, Douglas might offer Martin Luther King and the tradition of non-violent protest as its own form of Christian citizen-protection, affirming the shared humanity or (in Copeland's formulation) "creatureliness" across differences that seeks to dismantle boundaries and offer redemptive counter-narratives capable of sustaining new visions of community.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated some of the ways in which guns have been pondered theologically by denominations, academic theologians, pastors and a handful of theologically minded lay folk. While a range of views is represented across such resources, it is not clear that any particularly speak to or for American Christian gun owners. In the next chapter, we will hear the ordinary theologies of a small sample of that large group. As we do, it will become clear that the broader themes I explored in the second half of this chapter, including responsibility, the Common Good, embodiment, universality, and exceptionalism are all operating.

Chapter Four
Speaking with American Christian Gun Owners

Methodology and This Research

This study has tried to situate American Christian gun ownership in historical, sociological, and theological perspectives in order to better understand the variety and complexity of this practice and the many forms of tradition and reflection on which it draws. It will be apparent that the broad swath of research on gun ownership finds firmer ground in pondering why owning and carrying guns is something done by *Americans*, without much to say about it as something done by *Christians*. The sociological literature notes, for example, that gun ownership rates are higher among Evangelical Christians, relative to any other religious group, but largely leaves the matter there. Denominational statements attempt to ponder the problem of gun violence with various degrees of complexity, sometimes acknowledging in passing that some of their own members might be gun owners (which is almost certainly the case) and engaging Biblical and theological tradition in a formal voice that calls for practices of lament, accountability, and tentatively, hope. Some particularly hearken back to the pacifism of the early Church, as if to say that guns (or at least handguns) should never have been brought into the world (a view formally held by the historic peace churches such as the Amish), and that a proper faith sees this only as brokenness and sin. But again, such statements seem to address a chronic but multi-faceted American problem (gun violence) without seeming to ponder how it might be an American *Christian* one—a family matter, of sorts—even if only because many American Christians are, in fact, gun owners and have been from the very start.

When it comes to the role of faith in Christian gun ownership, much of the literature seems to describe a combination of toxic masculinity, American exceptionalism, libertarian conservativism, Whiteness, and Evangelicalism as the key socio-cultural identifiers (see Chapter Two). However, what is striking is how rarely scholars and media alike seek to incorporate the perspectives of gun owners, themselves. This chapter will seek to do so, sharing the perspectives of 24 self-identified Christian gun owners. Initially, this study was intended to hear from them (and others) as part of 6-8 in person focus groups conducted across the country, with some participants asked to do 30 minute follow up interviews by

phone. However, because of COVID-19, only the pilot focus group in a central Southwestern city and the first two focus groups from the Midwest (rural) were conducted as planned. Two additional in-person focus groups conducted in Bridgeport, CT in February 2020, were held, but then excluded for other reasons; two planned focus groups in Arizona were due to occur in the very week when quarantine was first declared and air travel tightly restricted—these were postponed and then postponed again, and ultimately abandoned; early attempted recruitment of focus groups of Roman Catholics in Chicago and Connecticut were unsuccessful despite much effort; an attempted focus group of college students at a University in the southwest was also abandoned because of COVID restrictions, although it was unclear if it would have succeeded.

Accordingly, the remainder of the research was conducted over Microsoft Teams and by phone. Recruitment also shifted from advertisements in specific communities to "snowballing" that gathered people from different parts of the country. A further consequence was that after an initial expression of interest in participating, participants were contacted by the researcher to discuss the study and to give an initial impression of their views with an eye to assembling focus groups. These were conducted as semi-structured interviews, recorded with participants' consent and turned out to provide rich conversation and invaluable insight. This was even more so as the later focus groups varied in size due to participant availability, and the ensuing conversations were at times dominated by one voice or two rather than being the broad exchanges that were imagined at the start.[213]

The transcripts were anonymized except for general demographic information. An initial review by the researcher identified key moments when participants shared a personal story, described a practice, referred to Scripture or other sources of religious

[213] Unfortunately, some participants were not ultimately able to participate in a group conversation at all, despite their willingness to do so. Technological issues were also a factor, with Microsoft Teams unavailable for the researcher on the occasion of one focus group, requiring rescheduling which excluded some anticipated participants; similarly, occasional technological issues on the participants' end at times meant they could not connect at the appointed time, or, in a more general way, that the general flow of conversation was compromised. Since this online phase of the research happened largely in the winter of 2021, it is unclear how the frustration (or perhaps embarrassment) of weak or glitchy video connection may have influenced both the participants and the researcher. It is also not known whether some potential participants may have decided against joining the study simply out of "zoom fatigue."

knowledge, repeated a statement or opinion (suggesting its importance to them), or indicated a statement or opinion was strongly or weakly held (e.g., "I really believe that," "I just think that," "I guess…), etc. These moments were then reviewed to develop a series of thematic codes that varied in specificity, including broad ideas like "responsibility" or "intention"; values such as "protecting the innocent," "practicing humility" or "avoiding temptation; and specific practices (e.g., "prayer," "deescalating/avoiding violence," "open or concealed carry"; Scripture (e.g., the right to self-defense in Exodus 22, Jesus' counsel to buy two swords in Luke, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," "love thy enemies"), or theology (e.g., humility, prudence, providence, etc.).[214] Once the codes were developed, all transcripts were reviewed to look for thematically-significant moments not previously identified. Finally, a list of themes was developed, with participants who spoke to any given theme sub-listed, and these were analyzed for similarities and differences with one another. The findings of that process are offered below.

In quoting from the interviews, I have attempted remain true to the people I met and not to present any as one-dimension "mouthpieces" for a particular perspective. I have attempted to account for silences, inconsistencies, and areas where their thinking might be challenged, but I do so not (I hope) out of disrespect or a desire to argue back, but as someone who stands outside their practice and has tried to get to know it better. In listening to and pondering upon how they themselves describe what they do and why, I have written this chapter, asking myself if they would recognize themselves in their words as I have quoted them. I do not wish to present their views as "representative" of American Christian gun-owners, generally, but only to suggest that when a small group of American Christian gun-owners was asked about their practices on a series of occasions, some conversations with individual and others in groups (and those varying in size), this is what

[214] It is important to note that by "broad ideas," this study means a particular word (such as "responsibility") used in a range of ways, rather than a particular concept as suggested by a range of words. I have tried to remain close to the language of participants and to signal its process of synthesis and evaluation as clearly as possible. It should also be acknowledged that at the outset, I had planned to code the transcripts according to a social constructionist approach that included how the group constituted a "shared reality" for the participants (see, for example, Pranee Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice*. (London: SAGE, 2011), 178-179). However, it was unclear how to interpret non-verbal cues or body language over Microsoft Teams (as made necessary because of COVID protocols from the University). Moreover, because the size of the groups varied and because the individual interviews provided such rich conversation, thematic analysis that identified patterns across the data seemed more appropriate.

those gun owners said. My intent was to connect with participants of various backgrounds in different parts of the country, some rural, some suburban, some urban. With groups hard to assemble, even prior to COVID, I started by going where people said yes and could agree on a date to convene—this yielded three strong groups and two flat failures when scheduled participants did not appear and people (including a young man who did not identify as Christian, did not own a gun, and did not know anyone who did) were simply told to go in by a well-meaning host at a particular location. Both before and after COVID, it was apparent that few Christian gun owners were likely to respond to a general invitation to participate in a study. Working with a person in their community or otherwise known to them who could vouch for me was the only way to make contact. Once an initial interview clarified the tone and spirit of the questions and the larger goals of the research, many participants were willing to help me contact someone else they thought I should talk to. In fact, some were quite eager to help at that point and shared contact information and an introduction to someone they thought I "***had*** to talk to."

Not all appear in this chapter or in one of the others. Initially, I expected to begin with focus groups and conduct follow ups with a small number of participants from each one, asking them to clarify or expand their views from the initial group conversation. My first three focus groups proceeded thus, with follow up interviews lasting around 30 minutes. As suggested above, after I moved my research on-line in late fall 2020/early winter 2021, I found success in conducting lengthy "pre-interviews" (often up to 90 minutes long) that would help participants get a feel for my questions and for me; this then led to their willingness to continue the conversation in a focus group. Those pre-interviews were recorded with their consent, as were the focus groups themselves. In a few cases, some who contributed pre-interviews were unable to be scheduled in a focus group; my research proposal was amended and approved to include their pre-interviews.

So, of those who do appear, why them and not someone else? The Christian gun owners I interviewed offered a range of perspectives, which I have tried to organize in categories broad enough to include everyone (somewhere) but narrow enough to offer insight into people who share a behavior (gun ownership) and an identity (being Christian), even as they live into and connect the two in very different ways. Some appear more frequently than others for a variety of reasons, including participation in focus

groups as well as one on one interviews, and/or more relatively more active participation than others in a focus group, giving me more with which to work during the analysis of the transcripts. Some people are talkers. Others shared behaviors or perspectives that moved or shocked me, and which I remembered well after the research phase was completed. In reading the transcripts later, not all those moments made it in (although many did) simply because they came in the form of stories that could be hard to distill. In those cases, I tried to identify what I had found so suggestive and look for moments in the same transcript that got at the matter in a more abbreviated way. Other moments seemed important at the time, but then less so in light of subsequent interviews. Where I have quoted participants, I have tried to honor their complexity and resist the impulse to reduce them to a "point of view," which is to say, draw on their words to construct straw men (or women). If my quotations appear somewhat long in some places, my goal has been to let the interviews drive the discussion as much as possible rather than merely illustrating a pre-arranged tour, of sorts. I hope it will also suggest further possible lines of inquiry down the line, recognizing that no study can hope to have accounted for everything. I further hope that places where my argument is less convincing have been left to stand.

In Chapter One (pages 30-37), I described the contribution of *shared praxis* and "ordinary theology." Yet before proceeding, it is important to ask this: is "ordinary theology" really happening under *shared praxis*? In some ways, it may seem not to be. The generative conditions of being invited by a researcher to theologize in stages among strangers do not bear much resemblance to the ways in which individuals do theology. This was evident during the focus groups when, for example, some participants struggled to wait for movement three (Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision), while others were at a loss in movement four (Appropriating Story/Vision to Participants' Stories): this seemed to ask them to do theology differently than they would have done if it had been up to them. As my own familiarity with the process developed, I became less directive in asking participants to wait for the "proper" movement and decided to let them shift to the next stage more organically. On the other hand, a certain amount of discomfort is not "bad," in the sense that it is important to recognize that the hesitations and silences, confusions and various strategies for reframing that transpired during the focus groups

and interviews were a central part of the project. Such moments did not represent "failures" to practice theology properly, but rather the work of actually practicing it.

Moreover, to Astley, to be an ordinary theologian already signals critical perspective of a kind upon one's faith, as indicated, for example, by a believer's emphases and elisions in what they "take away" from any given church service or perhaps any "Christian" form of endeavor. Even so, this dissertation would suggest that asking questions under the aegis of *shared praxis* helped to clarify some of the ways in which that critical perspective operated. Astley is surely correct that believers implicitly relate to some aspects of their faith over others and that this indicates an evaluative – and in that sense, a "critical" – perspective. Yet it seems important to distinguish, where it is possible, how that critical perspective operates. A believer making "choices" silently but consciously is being critical in a different way than another who may be responsive to their likes and dislikes, but not consciously reflective. Furthermore, deciding when one chooses to speak up, what one says, how one says it, and to whom are all critical judgements in their own right. How they may even reflect or shape a person's faith (for example, by informing how they participate in and belong to a given church community) merits attention. Even so, different believers recognize and ponder such questions in tremendously different ways. One important aspect of *shared praxis* is that it makes the work of discernment behind such choices more explicit. The stages of *shared praxis* also showed that to be "critical" is complex. One can be critical at some junctures and not at others; or relatively more and relatively less—say, engaged on the danger that might be, etc. This dissertation seeks to capture those differences.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and levels of education. "Ordinary theology" seeks to highlight those with no formal theological training; that said, two participants were active pastors with formal academic credentials (one of whom was interviewed but later unable to participate in a focus group); one was a former pastor (although not trained in a seminary); and several participants had thorough church-based backgrounds in Bible and doctrine through many years of faith-formation in churches where this was an expectation. While perhaps a departure from "strict" ordinary theology, the conversations were richer for the range. For what it's worth, rather than familiarity with theology, familiarity with guns and training

seemed to be a more salient form of expertise that made some participants more talkative and, perhaps, opinionated.

I also want to acknowledge that unlike some of the spirit of Practical Theology, I have not simply "started with experience," for example, by getting interviews and then "taking them to the library" to make sense of them. Some of that was due to the University's temporary halt to in-person research during the early months of COVID, which fell just as the focus groups were due to happen. In order to keep moving, I began to work with historical theological texts (especially Chapters Two and Three) at an earlier stage than expected. While I did not ask questions that directly drew on that research, some subtle confirmation bias may have been introduced.[215] For example, having engaged with H. Richard Niebuhr on responsibility**,** perhaps it is no surprise that "responsibility" ended up being a code analyzed across the transcripts. However, I did not try to broaden the concept with axial coding that might then make the concept somehow more weighty. I wanted to remain true to their words, not "mine," and my intent has remained for the interviews to drive the discussion, not simply illustrate or refine a narrative devised before most of them ever took place. The central analytical framework of Walls' model of inculturation, taken from the field of Missiology, provided a helpful way to organize broad patterns within the research well downstream from its collection and initial assessment.[216]

That said, there were also benefits to my early library time. Prior to the pilot focus group, I had never so much as touched a handgun, and as the focus groups and interviews began in 2019, there were technical, legal, and cultural references I would not have picked up on in the way I did. Moreover, as getting participants and doing the research became more difficult than anticipated, the question of "whom to try to get" took me in directions I had also not anticipated. I am confident that the study I initially planned, based on in-person focus groups held in different locations around the country, would have been unlikely to have attracted the Black gun owners I began interviewing, as it happened, in January 2021.

[215] Some indicative questions are presented in the next section.
[216] Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

It was not a neutral moment in which to begin such a project, and because I was using "snowballing" (in addition to online recruitment via trusted intermediaries who were willing to vouch for me) it was often thanks to those I interviewed that I found the next people willing to talk. With the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 still receiving active news coverage, and deeply troubling to me, personally, I was very interested when it (or the Trump Administration) came up and may have unwittingly encouraged participants to speak about that more than I might have, otherwise. Those willing to speak about it to a researcher may have also identified others particularly interested in the same opportunity. However, I also grew in my ability to let participants shape the conversation, coming to ask more open-ended questions and follow up from there.[217]

What emerges is a far more varied and complex portrait of deeply value-laden practices than is often acknowledged. Bennett, Graham, *et al*. have taught practical theologians to interrogate a practice by asking "what truths is it performing?", and that question is particularly powerful in the context of Christian gun owners.[218] The participants in this study suggest that there are multiple, and even conflicting, truths that are being performed. Yet their understanding of where God is – and who God is – and who they are called to be as a result are often central to how they describe their relationship with guns and the challenge of the living of their days.

In what follows, hunters will be distinguished from personal safety gun owners, and personal safety gun owners will be distinguished from one another across a broad range of themes. Particularly notable is also the social location of speakers, as white and Black gun owners, and women (white and persons of color) and men (white and persons of color) describe the truths that have motivated them into the particular practice of carrying guns as they describe it.

[217] In one early interview, which I did not have transcribed until July 2022, my own participation—interruption—was so extensive that it was largely unusable. I was very fortunate that the person interviewed participated in a later focus group and, entirely at his own initiative, subsequently contacted me to respond directly to something he heard in that focus group that he had not wanted to address at that time. We were able to have a second, far more meaningful interview.

[218] Zoe Bennett, Elaine Graham, Stephen Pattison and Heather Walton, *Invitation to Practical Theology* (London: Routledge, 2018), 58.

Indicative Questions Posed to Participants

As I have suggested, the focus groups and interviews did shift slightly during the research period, as I learned to ask more open-ended questions and follow the lead of the participant(s). It was often the case that participants would answer one question in a way that largely anticipated something I had not yet gotten to ask. In general, I came to prefer honoring the flow of conversation rather than asking them to wait until I could ask it in a moment—unless they were in a focus group and others were looking to answer the initial question in their own ways.

However, the questions below can give a general sense of how participants were invited into conversation with me and one another. Participants were also asked to bring a Bible verse that felt relevant to their gun practices to discuss with the group:

How did you come to know about guns?
What kind of place do they have for you today? How did you get there?
What Scripture did you bring? (Or if they did not: what a Scripture verse that helps or challenges you as a gun owner/seems like it might speak to gun owners?)
What might be the differences between a specifically *Christian* gun owner and just a gun owner?
What do you wish people who don't carry guns, or who say they don't like them, understood better?

Subsequently added:
What do you think about guns in the world today?
Can carrying guns be a part of Jesus' command to love our neighbors?
When the world takes the love of God really to heart, what will be the right place for guns?
Are there particular stories about gun violence in the news that have stayed with you? How so? Why?

For Individual interviews:

Tell me about a time when you said, "I am really glad I had a gun."
What are the pros of having a gun, as you see them? What are the cons? How did you learn them?
How important is moral character in being a gun owner? What's that look like?
The NRA has a slogan: "Guns don't kill, people kill." Does Christian faith agree?
The NRA has a slogan: "An armed society is a polite society." Does Christian faith agree.

A Short Guide to Study Participants

For the reader's convenience, below is a list of participants in the interviews and focus groups:

Mimi (white personal safety/rancher/hunter)*[219]
Hank (white hunter, some personal safety)*

Tim (white farmer/hunter)* works with Bella, Bruce and Annie
Bruce (white personal safety/farmer/hunter)* works with Tim, Bella and Annie
Ron (white personal safety)
Henry (white personal safety/hunter)* brother of Bob
Bob (white personal safety/hunter)* brother of Henry
Bella (white former gunsmith)* works with Tim, Bruce and Annie
Lois (white personal safety)* works with Tim, Bruce and Bella

George (white personal safety)* former pastor of Maria, Charles and Mark
Maria (Black personal safety)* former congregant with George, Charles and Mark
Mark (Black personal safety)* former congregant with Maria, Charles and George
Charles (Black personal safety)* former congregant with George, Maria and Mark

[219] An asterisk signifies a one-on-one interview was also conducted with this participant.

Matthew (white hunter)* fellow congregant with Wade
Wade (white personal safety/huneter)* fellow congregant with Matthew

Isaac (Black personal safety)* Pastor; friend of Ellis

Ellis (Black personal safety)* Pastor, friend of Isaac
Anton (Black personal safety)*
Albert (Black personal safety)* gun club member with Wyatt and Michael

Michael (Black personal safety/urban farmer)* gun club member with Wyatt and Albert
Wyatt (Black personal safety)* gun club member with Albert and Michael

Tina (Black personal safety)*

Donna (Black personal safety)*
Crystal (Black personal safety)*

Hearing From Gun Owners: The Truths of Hunters

As the historical and sociological literature makes clear, guns grew up with modern American society itself, coming with European colonization and remaining a familiar implement of white colonial life, with roles in territorial conquest and defense, personal safety, and the daily work of hunting and farming. While the latter have largely become pastimes rather than close at hand necessities for survival, they remain important sources of meaning for many who practice them. In fact, for some, these pastimes both reflect and shape their practitioners' understanding of themselves as Christians.

Tim's Story

Tim is a white married man in his mid-40s with three children who lives in the rural Midwest on a small non-commercial farm and teaches at a nearby school. They worship at a small non-denominational church in their community and consider themselves active in the life of their congregation. As the son of missionaries (who disliked guns), Tim grew up in Africa, where a friendly neighbor taught him and his brother to hunt, which they both still pursue in the United States. Tim also hunts with his in-laws, who are enthusiastic sportsmen and also holders of concealed carry permits – a practice Tim rejects for many reasons, among them that it seems more about "sticking a thumb in Obama's eye" than about genuine concerns for their own safety. "I don't think they have actually ever carried in public," he notes. Even hypothetically, he remains critical. "The pros to carrying [are] if I were paranoid, if I were terrified, if I'd been hurt before and I was terrified for my own safety…by carrying I would be prepared…You have a means to react…with potency, whether for good or for ill…You have a powerful means of reaction at your immediate disposal…and that provides agency." (15) He says he feels much less safe when others are carrying. (7)

Tim is unusual among those interviewed because, while a gun owner, he strongly rejects personal carrying, even though he has been in dangerous situations (he and his wife also worked in Africa for a time and were based in an area with high crime and government corruption and intimidation). "I'd rather die than shoot someone," he says, adding on another occasion, "I don't think I could point [a gun] at a person." (Midwest Focus Group 2, 29) His reasons are deeply theological.[220] As he explains,

> we're…we're icons, we're image bearers of God, whether you're a believer or not. Every human being is an image-bearer. And if I take a life, I mean it's one thing to kill an animal. That's hard enough….that's solemn enough. That's still life. But taking something that was created and destroying it…a human being made in the image of God…goodness…we are made in the image of God and love

[220] It was also notable that while some gun owners tended to speak about theology or Scripture in response to direct questions from the researcher, Tim thought and spoke theologically with little prompting, at times even anticipating questions planned for later in his semi-structured interview.

> of neighbor is a…is a love of God as well…I am responsible for him, for my family, for anyone I meet. I am accountable for my treatment of them. (43)

As we will see, responsibility and accountability feature significantly in many of the interviews for this study. For Tim, this is powerfully oriented toward others, even a threatening other. Where others cite Scripture or church teaching and say it needs to be interpreted according to "common sense," or parsed carefully to garner its literal meaning, Tim's understanding of the plain sense of Christian faith has strongly pacifist overtones. "I don't see Jesus carrying a gun," he says simply, identifying Jesus as "a man of sorrows" and as one whose "pain is made perfect in weakness." (19)

With this in mind, it might seem curious indeed that Tim would elect to hunt and farm. However, he sees the gun as "a tool that allows me to engage in nature in a physical way." (11) By this, he seems to mean something beyond just the narrowly instrumental. He explains, "[I]n taking that deer, I am closer to nature than I otherwise would be because, not just getting me outside…but I'm also listening, watching, and I see [so much else]. I might have a close encounter with a deer every third hunt or something, but I'm watching squirrels…foxes…coyote…rabbits…the thing I kind of cherish is when I get to see woodcock." (12) He also acknowledges the "camaraderie" of hunting as a good, saying, "intimacy. Relationship. Whether with nature or with people. That. That's what a gun is." (14) In that spirit, he rejects semi-automatic weapons and handguns as "people killers" with no other purpose; when hunting, he also takes only three bullets, asserting that if he cannot take down a deer with that self-imposed efficiency, "well, then, I've got a problem…I need to make that first shot count." (22-23, Midwest Focus Group 2, 46). His language is not explicitly theological, but that sense of connection outside himself and of accountability remain strong. The attentiveness he describes in the practice of hunting has a powerful moral analogue in the duties of a Christian believer as he understands them.

Similarly, he discusses his interest in farming and hunting as not simply hobbies, but rather as part of what he describes as a larger "environmental ethic." As a participant in one of the focus groups, he notes, "I don't really like…I don't like at all where meat comes from in this country. I think animals are mistreated. And I think farming has gone industrial. And…that's led to the decay of values and small towns and a lot of that. We're losing that." (Midwest Focus Group 2, 30). Consistent with his sense of accountability to

God, he seeks to practice good stewardship of God's resources, saying, "This world is not mine. It belongs to my God. And I'm going to render an account for it at some point." (Ibid.)

In losing a sense of connection to where meat comes from, Tim worries that commitment to stewardship might be in jeopardy. He describes a moment when local boys threw rocks at some pigs, making light of it by saying "Well, they're going to die, anyway." Tim disagrees. "You don't treat life that way. They're going to die a quick death [as farm animals]. They've lived a good life. And for me, that's what the deer have experienced [too]…up until that moment. I want to end that life as swiftly and humanely as possible out of respect for life. I serve a God who is about life and not death." (Ibid.)

Hank's story

Hank is a white male urban/rural resident in the Southwest who proudly affirms that "I'm basically not too much of a city boy," (9) by which he signals close identification with rural life. "I just like being out in the country because that's where my life started," he explains. "And I think about this and that, and I try to keep it like my granddad would try to keep it. I try not to do anything that tears up anything. And that's the way I live." (ibid.) Married over 60 years with adult children and adult grandchildren, he maintains his grandfather's small ranch as well as a small home in a nearby city, which is where he attends a large Methodist church. As a young man, he served in the Air Force, although he did not see combat, and remains an active hunter. Like Tim, he does not carry for personal safety and does not own a handgun, although he is less pointed in rejecting guns for that purpose. He reports that he keeps a shotgun under his bed at home, rolled up in a large towel, so as to be inconspicuous. Many other participants in this study put a strong emphasis on safe storage of guns as a core practice associated with wise stewardship, however, this is not Hank's view. That said, it would be incorrect to conclude that stewardship is unimportant to him. Rather, he identifies it with reference to other practices. Most notably, he emphasizes that his choice of a shotgun rather than a handgun for protection is a deeply considered decision:

> I've always thought that pistols…and I hear this quite often…and I heard a lot before I totally made up my mind…that people had been hurt accidentally with a pistol. And there's very few people that hardly ever get hurt with the rifle or shotgun because you have to look down the barrel. And most people don't ever pick up the pistol to see what they're shooting at, they just take it up and shoot. That's sort of some of the thing we did in the military so you could choose [a weapon] and stop the enemy, so to speak. And I decided that, yes, if somebody breaks into my house, I can look down that barrel. Well, we do live in a pretty good-sized house, but I could look down that barrel and I could see who's coming. Maybe the whole body, if that was necessary. (5)

While many other interviews emphasized the importance of active training precisely in the name of developing good and quick reflexes, Hank sees rifles/shotguns as requiring more intent, and a better view of the person. Although he does not speak to this directly, it seems as if this may not be solely with reducing accidents in mind but might also represent a more cautious approach to using deadly force, even in a legally unambiguous situation (e.g., a nighttime home invasion).

Hank, while a very devoted member of his church, is not nearly as inclined to quote Scripture or frame his practices in the language of formal theology, like Tim. For example, he was unable to name a favorite Scripture and referred to parables as "proper fables." (8) However, his description of sitting in the deer blind on his ranch was like Tim's:

> I feel closer to God once to get in there, especially if it's like in the early morning hours because it's still dark. And I think of the days when I was with my grandfather because this is his old farm. And nearly every time I'm there, I'm not in the deer stand [in my mind], but I'd see things that we did back when granddad was alive, building fence, trimming briar, so to speak, and working the land. And…I'm sitting there, and I think about all of that because of the little things that I see, that I told everybody, and that makes me feel closer to God, [as it is] getting light. I can see the little rabbits and the squirrels, and the deer start coming out of the forest and briars. And then the sun starts shining, and the first thing I see is God. And then, I start thinking about my grandfather. I think of him a lot [there]. (8)[221]

[221] Other hunters speak similarly. For example, Matthew, a 50-year-old hunter and collector who lives in the coastal South says, "I definitely enjoy…sitting out there in nature. It's a very contemplative thing…There's this aspect of hunting that is also like 'signal' vs. 'noise'…you're out there…looking at this great big field…and you're trying to find the thing that you're looking for…to me that's always been a little bit spiritual….maybe a little bit like prayer." (14-15).

With obvious pride, he talks about his property and its proximity to the river, saying, "the animals have water. Bless their hearts, they come over to me to eat because I don't have cattle or horses or anything…[the] let's say 'civilized animals' …and they call all these 'wild animals, and I've got pictures you wouldn't believe…It just blows some people's minds…all those deer standing around grazing." (11). Clearly, Hank experiences a deep sense of connection to his grandfather in such moments, as well as a kinship with all life for which he is grateful. He rejects the pejorative connotations he perceives in the animals' "wildness," being moved by the gentleness of such pastoral experiences.

How does taking life fit in with Hank's sense of kinship and God's presence? He simply says that "he sees nothing wrong with it" (10) without elaborating, but pointedly rejects "trophy hunters" rather than those who use the meat or make it available to others. His own moral sense is more energized by waste rather than the broader question of whether such lives should be taken at all—and he mentions with strong approval organizations such as "Hunters for the Hungry," that take meat and make it available to homeless shelters and food pantries in his area. "[W]e're helping somebody that's hungry, and we're doing the wildlife a favor, so to speak. Because if they multiply way too far, then they start dying because they don't have anything to eat…I think that most of the people who donate to Hunters for the Hungry, they're Christian, too, because they see a definite use for what they do." (10). Clearly, for Hank, guns play a role in a larger vision of stewardship and appreciation for life that bears great similarity to Tim's affirmation of serving "a God who is about life not death."

Michael's Story

Michael is a 40-year-old Black married man with four children who lived in a Midwestern city but who has since moved to a rural area in the same state. He has been attending a non-denominational church with his family but indicates that they are equally comfortable with family-led devotions at home. He assures me that Bible and age-appropriate theological instruction are also active features of his children's education, which Michael and his wife deliver personally because the children are home-schooled.

The whole family also takes an active role in urban farming and was eagerly anticipating their move to a more rural area where this could become an even more important feature of their daily lives. Unlike Tim and Hank, Michael also actively practices concealed carry of a handgun and has strong beliefs about the importance of active training and personal protection. In fact, he has served as the president of a local African American gun club in his community, which was founded by another participant in this study to encourage Black gun ownership and proficiency. At the time of our interview, he had been carrying for "about five years," a decision he describes as a "duh moment":

> I'm not sure if it was the environment we lived in. There was a time…or maybe, I think more so, it was just the realization that bad people exist…I mean, after all the years of…seeing people, like, lost, and that still didn't register. I mean, was I dumb? I don't know [laughter]. Was I slow to learn? I don't know. It just clicked like this, you know? I need to be able to do a little bit better by my family. (4)[222]

Since then, this has also involved teaching his wife and his two eldest children to shoot.

While Michael is not a hunter and his practice as an urban farmer is distinctive among those interviewed, he has a broader interest in sustainability that engages in farming as part of a larger lifestyle. Like Tim, he has an "environmental ethic" (although a distinctive one) at the core of his practice, and as part of it, Michael means something larger than simply "nature" or "the food chain". Michael also understands himself and his family within that environment in ways that Tim does not. Tim's environmental ethic seems largely focused on enjoyment and proper use of creation. For Michael, people are more central to what needs his stewardship and protection. Thus, his story represents a subtle but significant shift in our portrait of gun owners. Tim and Hank seemed to find a sense of themselves as part of God's creation through their primary use for guns. Similarly, Matthew described hunting as "contemplative" or even a kind of prayer. In this sense, they seem to be naming personally significant religious experiences made possible, in part, by the use or presence of a gun. For Michael, this is not so. As we will describe in greater detail with personal safety gun owners, Michael tends to align himself in opposition to what he perceives as the dominant culture, and to see himself as someone seeking to embody an

[222] Because of a bad connection, the phone signal was dropped at 13:31, and a new phone call was initiated. Page numbers for the transcript of our conversation reflect two calls but were a single conversation.

alternative that challenges that culture.[223] The roles that Christian faith plays in his opposition and in his conception of the alternative he seeks to be, respectively, are complicated.

For example, where the other farmers and hunters tend to emphasize enjoyment of and gratitude for creation, Michael takes a more instrumental view of the work involved. He notes that his mentor at the gun club declared him "the first Black 'prepper' I have ever met," connecting Michael's goals as a member to a larger project of preparing (i.e., "prepping") for significant, even civilization-wide breakdown (such groups are portrayed briefly in movies such as "Terminator II: Judgment Day"). (9) Michael seems to wear the term ambivalently, both acknowledging the comprehensive work it represents and hinting at some hurt in its vague derision. "We're not rednecks, okay?" he insists.

> We live in the inner city…We consider ourselves urban farmers….[W]e do what's called 'pantry living' where we created our own economic system, our refrigerator to our pantry to our garden so…it will be less likely that food scarcity happens among us…[I said] "You know, let's start buying generators or something because, you know, the power goes out"…[He said to his mentor, who is the one who called him a "prepper"] "The usefulness of firearms needs to be restored to the Black community…but you can't focus only on firearms…We need to diversify…I don't need a gun club. [I need] an organization that teaches surviving, you know?" (10)

Along those lines, Michael describes the "murder" (his word) of a cousin several years ago [cause of death or circumstances not provided]. "He died in the hands of a woman who said – she's an older woman – …'you're not going to die by yourself.' And as much as I appreciate that, I would have appreciated it more if they gave him first aid, you know what I mean?" (Ibid.) He also describes a harrowing single-handed intervention on behalf of a stranger that resulted in a night of attempted retaliation at his home by local gangs, and when asked where he thought God might have been in that situation, he related a story about Moses: "And literally, God responds and says 'Why are you crying out to me?' And he told him to use what was there. And so for me, it's like, what's the point? God blessed me, you know, I have this firearm so I'm going to use what's in my hands." (8-9) Michael's deep

[223] This will be explored in more detail further on. However, this language comes from Andrew Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 6-9, as quoted in Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Books, 2016), 97-98.

commitment to self-reliance seems to point to a strong belief in free will, and perhaps also to a sense of God as largely removed from daily life, providing the tools but not guiding the outcome of a given situation. Thus, in describing his cousin's tragic death, he does not seem to see much value in the woman who practiced non-abandonment of the dying, but only the lost opportunity to save a life because she lacked the necessary training. It seems that for Michael, God's blessings are to be found in having the proper skills and tools for life in the world, and he resists any sense of a highly spiritualized connection between God and our lives. He even rejects sustainability as an aspect of his Christian walk in any easy sense. "I don't think it's like a revelation that I got," he says. "I think there's just something, like I don't have to pray every time I breathe. Lord, help me breathe! [Laughter.] There's just some things that we do that [are] totally natural."(14)

Yet it is important to recognize that Michael identifies deeply as a Christian. Like Tim, Michael also connects with Jesus as "a man of sorrows," although differently. He describes witnessing a murder "for the first time" when he was in fifth grade:

> She ended up opening the door or cracking the door and they ended up shooting her. She died naked in the middle of the street...But I think – I don't think I've ever had a worldview that the world was a safe place. I grew up in a house being abused. So I never was able to introduced to what safety felt like. And so, even as scripture talks about for Jesus, that he was well-acquainted with sorrow and grief. To be acquainted means you understand and you're very close to…And so, I think, for me, and dealing with it, I don't think I ever had the opportunity to ever actually feel safe, if that makes sense. When I say that, I don't mean it like I'm walking around, paranoid, looking over my shoulder every moment, every second in a continuous state of paranoia. But a lot of times, I['ve] observed that the world or the institutions of the world seem to exist to bandage us from reality or to steer us from reality, because there seems to exist more violence and more sin in the world that corrupts, and our institutions that we create…exist to blind us to that reality. And so, I think, never really being able to have that privilege of growing up feeling safe, I think I sort of resist the blinders. I'm not going to say I'm perfect at it, but I think I resist those blinders a lot. (Focus Group 4, 13)

For Tim, Jesus as a "man of sorrows" is a strong rejoinder to any notion of God supporting personal violence and points significantly to pacifism. Michael seems to see Jesus as "close to" traumatic experiences such as the murder he witnessed as a child, but surprisingly, he also sees that moment as somewhat formative, as the beginning of his ability to "resist the blinders" of a society that seeks to deny or diminish its own violence and sin. He sees that

resistance as something for which he keeps striving. But since he considers safety "an illusion," the man of sorrows points to the reality of the world's violence—and seems to call for response to that violence.

Michael's faith is also apparent in response to a common question across many interviews, "Is there a difference between a *Christian* gun owner and regular gun owner?" he responds affirmatively. "We don't purchase firearms to kill," he says. "We purchase firearms to seek to defend ourselves against those who had tried to do that to us." (15) As we will see with many Black gun owners in this study, he then particularly identifies the white community as a source of danger and theological critique. He says,

> one thing that has really turned me off in the gun community is this attitude or notion when it comes to the second amendment…among the white gun community to kill everything. Every solution is to hit…[T]here is this callousness you know in that environment that I have really come to despise…I hate it to the core…And for me, I think as a believer, I don't purchase guns. I don't think…that it's right for us to purchase guns based on the mindset that you know it would be easy for us to kill…[I]t's easy to shoot in self-defense but it should be hard to…I said to my wife [white people] are the Vikings…the pagans of today where killing is just a normal part of their culture. (15-16)

It seems as if part of Michael's spiritual challenge is to be clear-eyed about and prepared for the world's sin, avoiding both naivete and callousness, and relying largely on himself. Although only one other participant (who is white) also identified as a "prepper," there were other instances throughout the interviews when the conversations took a somewhat apocalyptic turn. In one focus group, a participant spoke about their intent to buy "something to hunt" in addition to their handguns, saying, "you just never know where this world is leading us. And I might need to eat." (Midwest Focus Group 2, 15) The other self-identified "prepper" also identified a vision of a broader social breakdown in the wake of a personal experience:

> Ten years ago, we lived out in the country. And I looked around at the helplessness of people who go through natural disasters. We lived through Hurricane Hugo…And as this country grows more psychopathic and this young generation of criminals seems to have...seems to place no value on human life, including their own. I said, well, I'm going to be ready. So, I have six months' worth of food. Several thousand rounds of ammunition. I decided I was going to get it and hopefully never use it, and I'll pass it along to my nephews and give the freeze-dried food to the boy

> scouts…[But] I think we're screaming forward into uncharted territory, and I think that God is lifting his blessing from the United States…Hopefully, it will be a Christ return, not this apocalyptic vision that seems to be unfolding right in front of us…. (Wade, 4-5)

One wonders who he means by "this young generation of criminals" and if this might not be racial code of some kind. Notably, elsewhere in the interview, Wade speculates on being the victim of "reverse racism" at the hands of local law enforcement and says that "I did not carry until the BLM [Black Lives Matter] movement started, and we had riots in [my city]. So many of the police have quit and, I mean, you're on your own." (3)[224] As we will see throughout the next sections of this chapter, the Black Christian gun owners interviewed are often explicit about racial conflict and violence, while white Christian gun owners referred to race only sporadically and often in circumlocutionary fashion. In this instance, it serves to underscore how different two self-professed "prepper" Christians can be. Michael admits that growing up he "never had the opportunity to ever feel safe," and yet he describes a life of self-reliance and constructive engagement with the world around him. Although distinctively so, he might also be said to serve "a God who is about life and not death." By contrast, Wade seems more afraid and more inclined to see God's judgment at hand, which he seems to believe is largely on his side.

Hunters and Farmers: Conclusion

Guns are either intrinsic or closely related to hunting and farming, and for some, they are part of how those activities offer a sense of connection to God. Nobody interviewed for this study described a particular joy in killing for its own sake, although Tim conceded that he does try to hit what he shoots and "feels a rush of adrenaline" when

[224] Some of Wade's spiritual wrestling is apparent when he was asked what he makes of Gospel teaching such as "turn the other cheek" or "love your enemies." He says: "It's a great question…I'm okay with saying I don't know…It's pretentious for you and I to even think we're within a million miles of understanding all that's in [the Bible]. So, no, I don't get it. I pray that it's not a salvation issue because I doubt I'll make it...I just hope that there's a lot of grace involved in 'love your enemy' because I can say those words and pretend like I do, but given that's just my what's in my heart…When I'm being myself, I'm not very good at…forgiving." (13) Wade seems to sense a clear norm but not how to practice it.

he gets a deer in his sights. Many seem to understand the experience as one of being part of creation and an expression of stewardship for creation.

For others, such as Michael, farming (particularly the urban farming he was practicing at the time of his interviews) is not a particularly gun-related activity, but rather an expression of a larger commitment to "preparedness" that most actively engages guns as a form of self-defense rather than of stewardship of the land. In some sense, Michael seems to have concluded that he must be a steward of himself and those he loves, first and foremost. But as even a quick comparison to some others reveals, Michael is hopeful in a way they do not seem to be. He calls himself a "prepper," but tells the story of being called that for the first time in a light-hearted tone. The seriousness of the childhood trauma he describes resists over-simplification of Michael's "real motives," but his life as he describes it seems larger and more meaningful – a discovery of vocation – rather than a hunkering down. By contrast, in Wade's case, it can seem as if he both fears the chaos of a coming apocalypse and looks forward to the reckoning it will bring. The image he describes of himself on a bed surrounded by beef jerky with six months of ammunition underneath him seems particularly joyless, and it is hard to discern to what extent he lives in the shadow of a God he understands to be angry, and to what extent the God he sees is one made in his own image.

Hearing From Gun Owners: Self-Defense and White Christians

The remainder of this chapter will describe the interviews in which self-defense or personal safety was the primary rationale for a gun owner. This was by far the most significant use for guns identified by participants. In all, 21 said they kept a gun or multiple guns for personal safety, while 20 indicated other primary or secondary uses: eight who discussed farming, eight hunters, one sport shooter, two collectors, and two gunsmiths. Four participants specifically *rejected* carrying for self-defense. This section will draw on interviews with white Christian gun owners; the final section will draw on those with Black gun owners. Among white gun owners were nine men and three women. Among Black gun owners were seven men and five women. While there is significant overlap between the groups, as will be shown, the significant number of references to white supremacy, racist violence, institutional racism among Black participants suggest that even terms used in

common (such as "responsibility") may have distinct meanings that need careful tracking. While the same might well be said for women as opposed to men, the relatively small number of white women interviewed for this study who actively carry makes it difficult to generalize across groups. This is obviously an area that merits further research, particularly in light of American gun-culture's perceived (and in some cases, toxic) masculinity.[225]

As we noted initially with Michael's story, Christian gun owners who carry for personal safety tend to describe their practices differently than hunters or farmers do. The perceived necessity that drives their carrying is often more emotionally charged, sometimes significantly so. As people of faith, they are highly attuned to the ways that "the culture contradicts the ways and teachings of Christ," and they understand themselves as charged to embody alternatives that "invite [the culture] toward a life in which injustice, violence, and oppression are overcome."[226] It will be evident that, in the context of American Christian gun ownership, many potential ironies exist in such a stance. As we saw in Chapter Three, the early years of Christian history would have emphasized the Church's commitment to a thorough-going non-violence as just such a witness and alternative to the larger culture. In part with that in mind, the extent to which gun carrying is not a protest against culture but a surrender to it will be revisited later. However, what is significant at this stage is way in which self-defense gun owners seem to imagine themselves in such terms.

Bruce's Story

Bruce is a white married man with young children. He is in his early 40s and attends his local Protestant church. He lives in the rural Midwest, where he (like Tim) has a small farm as well as employment at a school. He identifies as a hunter, farmer, and self-defense gun owner, but it is the latter to which he speaks most actively. In fact, he scarcely speaks of other uses. Bruce is a military and law-enforcement veteran. He participated in a focus group, in which he was an active and even dominant participant, often being the first to

[225] See for example Kristin Kobes DuMez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Captured a Nation.* (London: Liveright, 2021).
[226] The language comes from Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 98, summarizing Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 6-9.

answer questions and setting the terms of their discussion. He also participated in an individual interview.

According to Bruce, he is "in the minority when it comes to the people who take seriously the protection of themselves and others…[T]here are fewer and fewer of us who are willing to take on that responsibility and carry a concealed weapon." (2) Although he comes from "a family that historically has had little use for and see[s} little purpose in owning a firearm" (2), Bruce does. In part, he alludes to the "self-sufficiency" of hunting, advocating for "taking down a deer to put meat on the table in order to supplement our current wares, or even to supplement some of our dependence on the big box stores [e.g., large national chain wholesale groceries such as Costco or Sam's Club] as it were." (3) But while Tim describes the same practice as part of a larger "environmental ethic," Bruce frames it in more immediately economic terms and seems (in his use of "as it were") to be alluding to a norm, vaguely critical, he has learned elsewhere. The "big box stores" are themselves part of a larger system offering lower prices through economies of scale, often driving smaller, local businesses out of their communities – but it is unclear if the "dependence" to which he alludes refers to that or to something else entirely. His practice also bears some similarity to what Michael described as "pantry living" as an urban gardener, but Bruce does not explicitly connect it to a larger concern about food scarcity or "prepping," although he seems to have some of the same institutional skepticism or distrust without an explicitly stated set of reasons.

That skepticism is also suggested in his strong commitment to concealed carry outside the home. "…[T]here's kind of a funky saying in some circles, and that is, 'When seconds count, the police are only minutes away," he says. (3) Although he identifies as former military and law-enforcement, himself, he speaks of it more readily in terms of the training he received rather than as something of which he still feels a part or with particular insight into the challenges of being sworn to uphold public safety. (Midwest Focus Group 1, 4)[227] When pondering the possibility of churches as a place for firearms education, Bruce warms to the idea, reflecting,

[227] As we will see, this stands in strong contrast to the interviews with Wyatt, a Black sheriff and gun-instructor who is friends with Matthew and has participated in the same gun club.

> well, maybe we're being given a chance here to look after ourselves and we're supposed to be self-sufficient, right? We're not supposed to rely on others. We're supposed to have our affairs squared away, so why is this any different?...Maybe we are given an opportunity [to proclaim] that self-preparedness and obligation to have our affairs squared away. Maybe it is being presented [providentially?] for a reason, I don't know. (Midwest Focus Group 1, 28)

The claim that "We're not supposed to rely on others" is striking. That he imagines it as a central message of a church community, equipping its members for life in the world, is also notable.

His sense of being largely on his own extends in two significant ways. First, his sense of the potential danger of the world around him – a view that is, unsurprisingly, widely shared among personal safety gun owners. He describes having a concealed handgun as

> an additional level of confidence. I have in my ability to be in society to be safe because I have the ability to protect myself. These random shootings happen in random places. And you know what? I live in 'random'. I live in, go to, and attend random functions. So I mean, these things happen. So the ability to potentially be prepared, so to speak, is a big deal for me. (4)

His emphasis on randomness was shared by others (although interestingly, Black gun owners tended to describe a similar idea by naming the pervasiveness of white hostility, which might result in danger anywhere, anytime).

Second, Bruce seems to see himself as fighting the stigma of being a gun owner in a culture that does not understand or approve. He says,

> quite often we are viewed as people who are looking for conflict, have a short fuse, and are less likely to be normal, functional, reliable parts of society at large. And I think that's due largely to the fact that there is that level of ignorance out there, and there are a lot of misinformation that goes on about the uses of guns. There are so many people now that want to spout off crazy stuff about the second amendment, and they're just not informed. (3)

His phrasing "there are a lot of misinformation" may suggest a certain initial hesitation to name people (the "misinformed") rather than the facts as he sees them, however, he then quickly homes in on people "that want to spout crazy stuff" as the core of the problem. He describes his sister as one of those he means, then tells about taking her shooting almost as a kind of "conversion" narrative. "I was thoroughly impressed at her willingness to look

into a different perspective. And she came out with a whole new appreciation for firearms and firearms carriers, I suspect." (2) (He does not describe engaging with other perspectives about guns, himself.)

More controversially, Bruce also admits that he makes his own decision about whether to carry his gun, even in places where it is specifically forbidden to do so:

> For me, it's a matter of legality. And you have to find a balance between – well, I perceive [there] to be acceptable risks when it comes to being discovered….I'll tell you right now, I carry in a lot of places that say no firearms allowed…But if I feel there is a reasonable expectation that I will be not be discovered, and that that area could be targeted to be in a higher probability of guns [by] the fact that it's a 'gun free zone,' then I'm likely to go ahead and carry [there]. (5)

It is not entirely clear what he means by "legality," although he may mean seeing his Second Amendment "right to bear arms" as more fundamental than any would be restrictions. It is also interesting to note his language of "reasonable expectation" as legal language, which he uses in the context of describing his decision to break the law. As he elaborated in his focus group,

> there are a lot of places where you 'should not carry,' and in most of those places I choose to carry for the exact reason that they're viewed as being soft [i.e., easy] targets because anybody who would be up to no good knows that it's a gun free zone. And in most scenarios, I will choose to carry, and I will take the consequences should I have to face them and deal with law enforcement rather than find myself in a situation where something happens, and I know that I'm trained and prepared to deal with it [but cannot]…But it's a question of would I be willing to look myself in the eye, in the mirror, and/or wouldn't I have done something in that particular case…[T]here are going to be consequences to your actions regardless of taking action or not. There will be consequences, and you need to be able to deal with those. (Midwest Focus Group 1, 6)[228]

[228] Another member of Bruce's focus group described driving students in a professional capacity through major midwestern urban environments and choosing to take his "sidearm" with him to do so, "But I don't make it known that I have my sidearm though I do, just because I don't want them freaking out that something is really going to go wrong and it won't." (Midwest Focus Group 1, 4). His major concern seems to be alarming the students about the dangers of a neighborhood rather than their potential for alarm about his gun, or with regard to any relevant school or state rules he might be violating. By contrast, other gun owners made it clear that they always comply with local gun regulations and shared their sheepishness at realizing they had failed or were about to fail to do so. As we will also see, Black gun owners are far more circumspect about when they carry, permitted or not. Their *praxis* is profoundly aware that their legal right to carry can become meaningless in the face of white fear and aggression, particularly from law enforcement.

Bruce is not alone in this. When his focus group discussed church security teams and unofficially carrying in church, Bob, a white Protestant in his mid 60s, said that he does so even when visiting his family at a church where guns are not permitted.

> I'll carry in their church. And I'm a little more cautious in that church because I know it will not be approved of. I have family [who] would not have a clue why it is that I'm carrying...But I also know that if there's an incident, there will be no complaints. (Midwest Focus Group 1, 17)

Bruce quickly agreed. "So I'd rather be judged by twelve than carried by six, right?" he quipped.[229] (Ibid.) His sense of conscience is clearly strong, although it is difficult to identify just how it operates or how it has been formed, whether by Bruce's faith or through a range of sources and experiences. Similarly, when asked what is "non-negotiable" for Christians in his interview, he surprisingly said "unconditional love." When he was asked how carrying a gun expresses such love, he responded, "It's that willingness to accept that you may have a really harsh fate in life, should you decide to brandish that firearm or [do] something with that firearm, even if it's ultimately good." (11). For him, love's self-sacrifice in the name of a greater good is implicit in what it means to carry. Of course, it is very different than Tim's assertion "I'd rather die than shoot someone," which also had tones of self-sacrifice, although it was a more explicit expression of Christian witness. Nevertheless, it is notable that Bruce articulates many of the norms of his practice by quoting wisdom from American gun culture rather than Scripture or theology. He uses faith language more readily to describe the broader values that underlie those norms, as he sees them. Yet such ready quotations also underscore that while Bruce so clearly describes himself as living in opposition to the broader culture, he is also deeply immersed in it. How he seeks to resist the worst aspects of its "gravitational pull" is not clear.[230]

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[229] This is also a widely known slogan, although not one with which I was previously familiar. However, a quick Google search yields that the saying is widely available on t-shirts, patches, magnets and mugs. Apparently, it is also the title of an album by the hip-hop group Trinity Garden Cartel from Houston, TX.

[230] Again, the term comes from Kreider's summary of Andrew Walls, *Missionary Moment*. See Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 97-8. For Kreider, Walls' "inculturation" names both the capacity of the Gospel to find expression in new and surprising forms, as well as the danger of its message being coopted in new contexts by (and for) "injustice, violence, and oppression."

Mimi's Story

Mimi is a married white woman in her mid 50s with two teenage daughters, who lives in a Southwestern urban area but also owns a farm within 90 miles of her city. She is a licensed NRA gun instructor and is active in her community, particularly around its permanent rodeo facility, which her family operated at one time and which she served as Director of Operations. She was baptized Roman Catholic but also attended Baptist church services as a child with a grandparent; now she and her family are active in an Episcopal church. She attended a focus group in full formal cowboy attire—hat, a suit with intricate rhinestones and buckskin fringed elbow length gloves, and white leather cowboy boots.

While Christian faith is clearly important to Mimi, she resists any simple connection between being a Christian and being a gun-owner. She would most readily identify as someone who is a Christian *and also* a gun-owner. "I am a Christian gun owner," she said, "and I don't think being a gun owner has any more to do with being a Christian than anything else. I mean, I'm also a Christian that owns a car…and a dog. It's an inanimate object that, you know, does nothing." (9) By this, she seems to be signaling her deep familiarity with guns and a strong belief that they are "just tools," which was a view shared by many of those interviewed for this study. (It was also somewhat hard to reconcile with my memory of her in full cowboy attire from the focus group, which seemed like such a proud assertion of her place in a rich subculture all its own.)

Earlier in the same interview, she articulated this somewhat differently, in describing the process of getting her formal license to carry (LTC). She said,

> a lot of it is just common sense…[O]nce you know the law and understand the law…[t]here's really no grey area, nothing is really for my opinion…The rest of it would be…where my Christianity come in because what the law doesn't teach, Christianity does, and there's no grey area there, either. You either believe that the Bible is God's Word or you don't, but it's not open for interpretation or [being taken] out of context." (4)

Like Bruce, Mimi does not readily identify Scripture or theology as a source for the norms she follows as a gun owner, yet many of her "shoulds" were broadly shared by others interviewed, often with more direct warrants from traditional sources of Christian religious knowledge.

Mimi named many of these quite succinctly, when asked to enumerate the "shoulds and shouldn'ts" of being a gun owner. She observed,

> you should do it for the right reasons. And when I say that I mean: *do you live by yourself*? Are you wanting to *protect your family*? Do you have a dangerous job? Those types of things. *You should not do it because you are wanting to be a vigilante* in some way or [because] you would go after somebody. *I don't ever want to be a hero; I want to be a survivor.* So I would never…[pauses] There are several situations that I would never pull a weapon…you know, that's what we have police for. It has to meet certain criteria for me to feel like I'm forced and I have no other option but that. It should be the *last option*, after everything else has been exhausted. It should never be the…first thing you're going to do in a crowd full of people. (3, my italics.)

Her focus on proper intention and defense of the vulnerable were very common themes across many interviews. Moreover, her rejection of being "a vigilante" as well as even "a hero" were also common, as we will show, as is the sense of drawing a firearm only as a truly last option.[231] Many would identify such practices as hallmarks of *Christian* gun-ownership, specifically. Unlike Bruce, Mimi has no sense of vocation to protect the larger world if necessary. Certainly, she "takes protection seriously" (in Bruce's words), but she understands that responsibility within a narrower circle of care and might define the "greater good" in terms of that circle rather than extending outward from it.

For Mimi, these specific "shoulds and shouldn'ts" of practice were not explicitly tied to her faith. However, they did fit into her broad narrative of ultimate accountability before God, which she described in detail:

> I can be as good and as faithful and as law-abiding and obedient as what God would ever want me to be but that doesn't mean my next door neighbor is going to be. And so as much as I pray and as much as I do it right and as much as I try…there still may come a time where somebody else makes a decision that is going to force me into a situation where I have to respond, and when that time comes, I believe God has been very clear with me that, you know, He hopes it never happens, either, and he's already got it all worked out and [pauses]—but if and when I'm faced with that, I know that as long as I am doing what I am required to do and do it right, then the rest is going to work itself out. I'm not going to go looking for a situation but if that

[231] Even so, it is important to recognize that this widely espoused value also coexists with those of Bruce and Bob, encountered earlier, that those opposed to guns will "thank me later" should anything happen, which suggests that carrying with what Mimi and others describe as a kind of humility of purpose may be more performative than real in the lives of some gun owners. Some fantasy of saving people may be more common than is readily admitted.

> situation comes to me, then I have responsibility based on my faith and based on what I know that I learned from God's Word to protect myself and to protect my children and really anybody in my family, and I will….And when I die and I feel like God's going to say, "Did you do the best you could've with what I gave you?" I need my answer to be able to be yes. And If I'm not taking care of my responsibilities to protect (my children) then it won't be yes. My faith is directly linked to every act I take. (5)

Mimi appeared to wrestle with affirming God's providential care but also acknowledged the importance of free will and unpredictability of others, with its potential to "force [her] into a situation where [she has] to respond." However, she felt her own spiritual path was clear, no matter what – that if she has protected those entrusted to her care and met the responsibility as she understands it in Scripture and from her own religious intuition or insight [i.e., what she knows "based on her faith"], she will be prepared to answer yes in the moment of God's accounting. Her trust was strong that if she does what she is required to do and does it "right" "then the rest will work itself out."[232] More than many other gun owners interviewed, Mimi seemed to see herself as moving toward the future rather than as focused solely on how to respond to an unpredictable present (even though she acknowledges it as such). To some extent, Michael's "prepping" had the future in mind, too, but he seemed more focused on meeting it with particular readiness rather than particular faithfulness. Also, God for Mimi was not known in "the man of sorrows" who identifies with human distress but was seen more remotely in some respects, as the source of blessing and ultimate judgment.

White Christian Gun Owners and the Place of Values

Although Mimi did not identify gun owning as a specifically Christian practice, it is clear that her most immediate current purpose for owning a gun, self-defense, closely

[232] What to do about our neighbors came up periodically in the interviews. In one focus group, Bella, a Catholic former gun owner who had come to reject most personal safety gun ownership, spoke to this, saying: "…{W]ith that in mind, that…that really forms a lot of why I don't want a gun in the house for safety, for protection. Because if I'm going to love my neighbor as I do my family, then I'm not…I don't…I'm not going to shoot them." She was politely challenged by another participant, who said, "Well, you may be shooting somebody to protect that neighbor…", to which she replied, "Well…[laughter]…But I'm saying…I'm…but I'm just saying, you know, I just, for me, that's...That's just how I look at it." (Midwest Focus Group 2, 28)

reflected both her values, which she described theologically, and also her broader understanding of who God is. Wade went further, arguing that Christian gun owners are no different than gun owners in general. He said, "I can't say that I know of anything a good Christian gun owner would do that an atheist gun owner wouldn't do." (12) Others indicated more explicit theological grappling around their practices. Bob, a white business-owner in his late 60s, noted that: "[Jesus] calls us to be protectors of the weaker," then wondered, "so would Jesus carry?" He quickly concluded, "he doesn't need to, but you know…I think there's places that where we're called to protect and those are places where he would say, yes, you carry." (11) He then observed

> there are people who think to be a Christian is just meek and you're totally mild and, you know, somebody would attack you and you just sit down and take it. And there may be a place for that, but not always. I mean, we certainly have an adversary in Satan to deal with and that requires warfare…Scripture says resist him and he will flee…I think the same thing applies in society. (13)

For him, the meaning of "meekness" and, more broadly, of nonviolence as Christian *praxis* needs to be properly understood.

Scripture

As we will see, others interviewed (white and Black) saw meekness and nonviolence as requiring reimagination in light of current circumstances—yet they looked to Scripture for guidance, albeit in some surprising ways. George, who is white, in his mid 40s, and now based in the West, alluded frequently, if somewhat generally, to Scripture, although it was clearly important to how he understood the meaning of carrying a gun. He observed,

> there's a line…A lot of days, you…choose to turn the other cheek. A lot of days, if you strike a person, somebody might pull out a gun…so, yeah, love your enemy, yes…[but] I think there's a big difference between that and somebody that is coming …to do physical harm to you…that's an instance where you…have absolute right to defend your home life in order to protect your family. (10)

His sense that "somebody might pull out a gun" on "a lot of days" seems to qualify his sense of when turning the other cheek should be held to apply. Similarly, for reasons that may be

self-evident to George (or which simply go unexplained) "love your enemy" does not apply universally but comes up against one's "absolute right" to defend home and family. Even so, he named his hope that a Christian gun owner would use a gun "in a Biblical manner," by which he means "for defense or for hunting,…whatever you do to support your family," yet with a bit more reservation about war, unless there is "no other choice." (9)

Others also seemed to struggle with "turn the other cheek." In Midwest Focus Group 1, one participant identified an imagined absolute commitment to turning the other cheek as "a misnomer." Another participant agreed in terms much like George's, saying, "I think there's a time and a place for that, but I think that's more *a propos* in a one-on-one situation. If you've got a family to defend, you may well lose your family if you choose to turn the other cheek. I think we have a responsibility there." (Midwest Focus Group 1, 10) Donna was not so quick to elevate personal experiences of violence, even when it is not in the name of saving others. She argued,

> I have been in actual fights…arguments and confrontations where I have turned the other cheek. I have done all of that…But again, when somebody is threatening my life…where if I turn my back, he'll shoot me…What was that? 'Turning the other cheek?' That's getting murdered…I'm not here to be a martyr. For what? In a grocery store? No. (25)

This is also significant in the case of Mark, a white former pastor who has since taken work in a gun store, which he says he prefers because "the camaraderie" of gun owners is more meaningful to him than the politics of running a church.[233] He questioned the misuse of "turn the other cheek" as an admonition for gun-owners, drawing a distinction between "minor" and "major offences" that shape his understanding of this particular Biblical mandate. He said,

> I believe minor offences is somebody cussed you out and cut you off and took your parking space…I think that is a turn the other cheek experience…[s]omeone coming and disrespecting you and lying on you and stealing a $100 bill out of your wallet is a turn the other cheek experience…And I think major offences are offences that when it comes to life and the standing of life. I don't think that would be [a time for] turning

[233] Mark also proudly reports he is the owner of 163 guns, trains 3-4 times each week, including 6-7 hours on Saturdays. Visited by the local police after a misunderstanding between a neighbor's child and his teenage son, Mark proudly recounted how the police searched his home and told him his guns were stored more safely than the firearms at the local police station. (8, 4)

> the other cheek...When Jesus says 'husbands love your church as Christ would love church, [we] know that Christ loved the church sacrificially, redemptively, and unconditionally. So if somebody comes in my home and begins to rape my wife, you mean to tell me that Jesus would just say turn the other cheek?...I think Jesus would fight for her honor…I really don't think [it]…is applied towards the major offences of somebody who just grabbed my daughter and threw her in a van and got her engaged into sex trafficking. Then I will jump in my car and I'm going to call the police while I'm following them. And if I got to get her from that, I'm loaded up. Locked and loaded. I'm going in. (20-21)[234]

As this lengthy passage indicates, Mark considers himself as remaining very close to Scripture and carefully maintaining the primacy of Jesus as a guide to life, yet it relies on distinctions (minor versus major offences) that might be interrogated by other Christians, and also refers to analogies from the life of Christ that can be difficult to follow at times. He speaks far more clearly when he vividly imagines his wife and daughter as potential victims of sexual violence and how he would intervene. But the almost filmic quality of his imagination may point to the subtle power of media-shaped images and narratives that have a normative force more urgent than that of theology, traditionally understood.[235]

It also suggests that for some gun owners, the influence of Scripture on norms may be more complicated than they acknowledge. In some cases, Scripture may shape behavior in a direct way. But as we saw with Mark, in other interviews, participants drew on qualifications and distinctions from outside the text itself that present its "true" meaning, rather than following the letter of the law. [236] In some circumstances, they question what "the letter" is. Along those lines, two participants (one Black and one white) noted that the

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[234] Mark concedes that the potential for overreaction – to treat a minor offence as a major one -- is real and precarious for a Christian. "[Y]ou're failing as a Christian in that moment because you're not understanding that as…a turn the other cheek moment." (20)

[235] Another such moment happened in Midwest Focus Group 2, when Lois, a Roman Catholic single woman in her mid 50s, who keeps a gun in her home and does not concealed carry, described the unexpected arrival of men in suits and sunglasses during the 7:30 a.m. Sunday Mass at her local (rural) parish. "At first…I thought 'oh, a men's group, how nice…7:30 in the morning, July 4th weekend…' and then there's all kinds of ruckus. And then I'm getting upset…I'm thinking 'Oh no, are they hear to kill us all? Oh no. Oh no…Oh Jesus, we will all be martyred." (42) She laughed and explained that it turned out to be then Vice-President Mike Pence visiting with his Secret Service detail.

[236] It is important to remember here that 17 of 24 participants identified as Protestants, many of them either current or former Evangelicals with a high view of Scripture. How a broader cross section of Christian denominations would have reflected on and navigated among norms is an important question for further work. Prior to the pandemic, I attempted to develop focus groups with Roman Catholics in Chicago and in Connecticut, but I was unsuccessful.

Biblical injunction "thou shalt not kill" is more accurately translated "thou shalt not *murder*" (my italics), a distinction that seemed to clarify for them that, in principle, proper intentions justified (or as another participant indicated, did not proscribe) keeping and even using a gun for self-defense. Neither expanded on the distinction to explain how killing in self-defense is different than murder (an assumption that Tim (the hunter/farmer), for example, would not likely make), although they seemed very certain that it was, indeed, different. Similarly, Mark understands "love your enemies" as a call on how to treat them after the fact rather than in the moment. "I think 'love your enemy' has to deal with the ability to forgive those who have offended you, past tense, not who are offending you presently." (22)[237]

In other circumstances, participants drew more guidance from pondering the allusive reach of a passage. For example, Bruce identified Exodus 22:4 as a key text ("If a burglar is caught in the act and receives a fatal injury, it is not murder; but if he breaks in after sunrise and receives a fatal injury, then it is murder." REB). He said,

> I was thinking what if there was more to this whole light and dark thing than just daytime versus night-time. Darkness could be any number of things. It could be dark circumstances…It doesn't necessarily have to be so cut and dry. I mean, really, what if he's talking about this intruder happening under circumstances that caused doubt or…fear for your life? It doesn't have to be dark outside for that to happen. It could be a dark time…[or] dark intentions that you're dealing with…. (Midwest Focus Group 1, 15)

For him, the Biblical text not only authorized self-defense, it may do so in circumstances far beyond the immediate scope of the passage itself, which seems designed as an exception to a more general norm of non-violence. That said, Bruce also reflected on Psalm 144 ("Blessed be the Lord, my strength, who teaches my hands battle and my fingers to fight…") and said that "for a long time I took that too literally. I was like, "Yeah, that's right. I'm out here to kick some butt. He says it's all right." (Midwest Focus Group 1, 13)[238] Since as we

[237] This is another moment where I regret not having asked him to reflect further and to explore how he understood what it is to forgive someone, particularly when they were threatening life and you responded by drawing a gun and perhaps firing it.

[238] More enthusiastically, Mark also alludes to Psalm 144 when he remembered starting a church security team while he was still pastoring. "I think that many…ignore that even…Scripture always had some level of weapon defense [i.e., justification]. It may not have been a handgun but it was a sword." (7)

indicated, Bruce reserved the right to decide when to carry, even in violation of the law, it is interesting to note his use of Scripture. He saw both a broader warning about the many kinds of darkness that might require armed response and also acknowledged his own capacity for taking things too literally – that is, for being overly stringent and reading into Scripture rather than from it.[239] He indicated that his own sense of what it was to be "armed" had also expanded as a result of his faith.

> I think you have to be willing to consider the meaning of "armed"…[T]he NRA is using it [as] a firearm-friendly term, [but] I think that you have to be willing to accept there are other ways to be armed and be willing to [take those] into battle, such as prayer. And prayer is…it's huge, right? What other weapon do we have against the enemy that is more potent than that? (12)

It is difficult to picture Bruce in an extreme situation, electing to use prayer as the most effective tool at his disposal. It also suggests how Bruce may see violence as a reflection of a much larger war—a contest of principalities and powers, although it is important to note that he did not use that language.[240]

In other circumstances, the gun owners interviewed may be encountering gun-supporting Scripture from a range of sources, perhaps curated by their pastor or church, or encountered on their own. However, the role such resources play in their beliefs turns out to be more complicated. This was suggested most clearly in several interviews that referred to Luke 22:35-6, in which Jesus warns the disciples to purchase a sword.[241]

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[239] One wonders how he came to see that initial understanding in critical perspective, and particularly how his understanding of the relationship between faith and firearms has changed over time.

[240] In fact, I was surprised that *nobody* interviewed used it. This disinclination to "spiritualize" the challenge of living safely in that way is distinctive from some of the formal literature about Christian gun use, and also from certain expressions of Christian nationalism and "right wing religion" (in James Aho's phrase). Without making broad claims based on something that *was not* in the interviews, it seems obvious enough that Christian gun owning in America is sufficiently mainstream that apocalyptic extremists are far from the only ones who practice it. How such "mainstream" Christian gun owners relate to such extremism is another question that merits further study. As we will see, the Black gun owners interviewed have a great deal to say about the pervasiveness of white violence and its would be religious justification. However, their point is that such violence is not extreme, but in fact, mainstream too.

[241] As we saw in Chapter Three, Luke 22:35-ff has received a certain amount of formal theological reflection. (See Chapter Three, note 167 on page 76). More critically, see Shelly Matthews, "The Sword is Double Edged: A Feminist Approach to the Bible and Gun Culture," in Christopher B. Hays and C.L. Crouch, eds. *God and Guns: The Bible Against American Gun Culture* (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 2021). Matthews notes the citation of Matthew 22: 35 by organizations such as the Gun Owners of America. Michael W. Austin has an excellent discussion of debating gun rights advocates with reference to this passage. See his *God and Guns in America*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2020), 101-105. Matthews and Austin, respectively, suggest that these are some of the resources upon which other organizations may be drawing in order to articulate a vision of

> He said to them, "When I sent you out barefoot without purse or pack, were you ever short of anything?" "No," they answered. "It is different now," he said; "Whoever has a purse had better take it with him, and his pack too; and if he has no sword, let him sell his cloak to buy one…." (REB)

As we have seen in Chapter Three, the passage is cited in pro-gun Christian literature, and its relatively frequent citation by those interviewed for this study may well suggest some engagement by participants with those resources. A Christian gun owner who listens to a podcast or a sermon, reads a church safety manual or attends a conference might well receive instruction from sources such as these. For example, in Midwest Focus Group 2, a participant described watching a video Bible study series at church that had particularly shown him how frequently weapons are mentioned in the Bible.

> I just recently read in Luke where Jesus says to take your coat, take your purse…and take your sword. "If you don't [have one], sell your coat for your sword…" "Look, Lord," they replied, "We have two swords among us." "That's enough," [he replied]. (Midwest Focus Group 2, 22)

However, it is important to note that Christian gun owners bring their own critical lenses to such resources. For example, when Luke 22 was mentioned in the focus group above, another participant jumped in quickly: "'That's enough.' That's what I love in that one." Four other participants readily agreed with the second comment—in fact, quickly enough that it may have been a polite disavowal of the initial one.[242]

The notion of "enough" also appeared independently in other two other interviews. Bob said: "Well, there was one point where he told the disciples to take a sword and they identified that they had one and he said that it was enough." (11) Similarly, George responded to the question "would Jesus carry a gun?" by saying,

> well, I think it would be much like he told the disciples you know he permitted them to carry their sword. And he…only allowed so much and he said that's enough. And what he permitted them to carry was a short sword and that was used for two things, defense [chuckles] you know self-defense because there were robbers and

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gun ownership and Christian tradition. If so, it suggests how the voices of theology need to be understood as part of an ecosystem of even more voices eager to speak "theologically" with their own authority. The contours of such an ecosystem are beyond the scope of this dissertation but offer an important area for further research. How gun owners acquire, shape and are shaped by media sources—which ones and in what ways—and how faith is a part of that are all significant questions.

[242] In fact, the initial speaker conceded: "That's right" with no further attempt to clarify or convince the others further on this point. (Ibid.)

> my mind just went blank. I'm trying to think of the other thing it was used for. But it was mainly used for a defensive weapon. (8)

George seems to be alluding to formal instruction he has received but cannot remember it completely. More importantly, these responses suggest that among these gun owners, it is not simply Scripture's justification of owning weapons that mattered, but also how it seems to limit that practice. Grappling with what "enough" means offers ample room for many views.

Faith as a Moderating Influence

One interview question from early in the research, although not from the beginning, asked participants to distinguish what made a Christian gun owner different than "just a gun owner." Presented in those terms, many focused on particular practices that they identified as inconsistent with Christian character as they understood it. Matthew, who hunts with and collects guns but does not carry for personal safety, pointedly rejected "open carry," the practice of having a visible firearm in public (which is permitted in some form (licensed or not) in all but four states and the District of Columbia). He disagrees with carrying guns "to public places to make some sort of political point," which he saw as "incredibly risky…[and] asking for trouble." He continued,

> I feel like in those moments we're probably…especially as Christians, I think we're called to deescalate…and to be the voice of love and reason, and I don't know how well you can do that when you're carrying…a weapon. (11)

Similarly, he reported acquiring an AR-15, the semi-automatic weapon that is the "civilian" version of the standard issue US Army M-16 rifle, and which has gained tremendous notoriety for its frequent association with mass shootings, including Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, Las Vegas, and many others. It was "a great deal," he noted,

> and so, I got it, I brought it home and it sat in the cardboard box for a while. [Sometime later] I opened up the cardboard box and I looked at it, and I was like "that's not really what I do, you know?" And [pauses]…so I closed up the cardboard box and …a few months later, I sold it…It just wasn't me. And I think that's a reaction

> to…everything that's happened in the last 20 years as far as mass shootings and stuff. (9)[243]

Of those interviewed, many others indicated discomfort with the practice of open carry and with semi-automatic weapons, in some cases even indicating their openness to much tighter legal restriction for such weapons, against the stated policy of the National Rifle Association and others.

More positively, they also spoke of intention and responsibility. They appear to place significant value in gun-carrying as a way to challenge the violence of the culture at large, and in its power to help them embody an alternative to that violence. Mark, who does carry for personal safety, described a seemingly intentional provocation in a restaurant, "the night after Biden was elected," when a stranger lifted up their shirt to reveal a handgun tucked into their waistband.[244] Although Mark and his adult son were both carrying at the time, had ample ammunition and were well-trained, he did not attempt to engage the stranger:"I got up and left, because I believe responsible gun ownership is not looking to run to a fight…[I]f you have an opportunity to leave, that's the best…you walk away from [it]." He noted that, "I could have jumped on a high horse and be like, 'No, don't be brandishing no weapons here.' To me, it wasn't worth it." (11) His personal interest in and enthusiasm for guns (recall that he reported owning 163 at the time of his interview) does not mean that he identifies readily or uncritically with all gun owners. His practice pointedly disavows such provocative behavior, as he describes it. As George said, "I guess like the Bible says, there's a time and a place for it but…for me, it's the very last *last* [his emphasis] ditch effort...where you got no other choice." (9)[245] As Mark's story indicates,

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[243] How gun owners understand "owning a piece of history" can also be complicated. Matthew reported not identifying with the AR-15 ("that's not really what I do, you know?), but he also identified the Luger his grandfather brought home from World War II as a highlight of his gun collection. Further studies might explore how notions of "righteousness" are operating, whether personally or by remembering and preserving objects associated with a "righteous cause." In that respect, what it means to preserve the artifacts of *the enemy's* (unrighteous?) violence would be a helpful addition to the literature.

[244] My interview with Mark occurred after the November 2020 election but before January 6, 2021. Thus, I did not probe for any deeper perspectives on Christian Nationalism, such as how he understands this event as connected to "the night after Biden was elected" in some way. With many of the interviews I conducted after January 2021, which were largely with Black Christian gun owners, such perspectives came up often.

[245] By "a time and a place for it," George seemed to be alluding to Ecclesiastes 3, "a time for peace and a time for war." He referred to national defense as a situation in which arms might be necessary and seemed to see a connection between that and personal carrying for civilian self-defense, but the connection he perceived was not

deciding how to respond – if one is in the proper "time and place" – is not simply hypothetical. While nobody interviewed described actually having taken a life, when they were asked if there were ever a particular circumstance in which they were "glad they had a gun," almost all responded affirmatively. The range of situations they described included killing dangerous or injured animals on a farm, traveling peaceably at night through dangerous areas, witnessing violence against others (and intervening), and like Mark, being menaced by others with guns. Their faith guided them in uses they understood as compassionate and, as we have seen, shaped their understanding of which practices were appropriate and which were not.

White Safety: Conclusion

In this section, I have tried to show the widely held belief among the white gun owners interviewed that Christian faith permits, and for many, positively approves carrying for one's personal safety and for that of one's family. Some would extend this circle further still and see a broader call to serve – defend – others in public if circumstances warrant. However, a range of views seemed to emerge around such a claim. Some of those interviewed rejected it.

More typically, participants suggested that how one interpreted such circumstances was tremendously complicated and required deep reflection from within their faith. Biblical guidance such as "thou shalt not kill" and "turn the other cheek" was understood from within their personal experience and with some allusion to formal contexts for the acquisition of religious knowledge, such as the distinction between "thou shalt not kill" as properly understood as "thou shalt not *murder*." More importantly, clarity around what such Biblical principles did *not* mean was as important as clarity around what they did. Navigating between the two was far from simple for most, and some put it more strongly still, suggesting that getting it wrong was full of tremendous pitfalls.[246] In the next section,

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entirely clear. A little later in the interview, he emphasized,"it's not the gun itself…it's the intent behind it and the heart of the one that is using it…whatever it may be." For him, that was clearly applicable in the context of personal safety and distinguished gun owners like him from "gangsters and stuff." (10)

[246] As we will see in the final section, this was different for many Black gun owners interviewed, who objected to the violence of white supremacy in the strongest terms. Such objections were more rare in the case of white gun

it will be clear that each of the Black gun owners interviewed spoke not simply about being a Christian gun owner, but about being a *Black* Christian gun owner, specifically. That merits mention here only to highlight that none of the white Christian gun owners mentioned their own race. While the white women who participated spoke of particular vulnerabilities *as women*, they did not mention any others. In contrast to the Black gun owners, it was difficult to understand who or what they were afraid of and why.

Self-defense and Black Christians

In many ways, the Black Christian gun owners interviewed share a great deal with their white counterparts. They also seek to ground carrying in their faith and frequently see a moderating influence in how a Christian seeks to carry. Furthermore, they also look to Scripture and theology as sources for understanding their practice*s*, and these are understood in a range of ways. However, as we will see, they speak from their personal experience differently and with a particular awareness of their vulnerability as Black people in a white dominant society. The ways in which this vulnerability shapes and is shaped by their faith is complex.

Albert's Story

Albert is a Black Protestant married man in his early 60s who works at a Southeastern university and lives in a suburban gated community, having relocated from the urban Midwest five years prior to our interview. He is friends with Wyatt and Matthew and was

owners, but did receive some mention. Here, I want to make the somewhat different point that how "pitfalls" were acknowledged and discussed, and how seriously they seemed to be taken, needs to be positioned with care. This was true of those interviewed, not only in this instance, but in general. They did not speak in absolutes. There are many possible reasons. It may reflect who self-selected to speak with a researcher on these topics, and then the people of similar outlook they suggested I might contact next. It might also signify how those interviewed decided to frame their views for a white, non-gun owning researcher based in the "liberal" Northeastern United States. How they speak in contexts where their opinions are "entre nous" may be very different. That said, they may also have felt more free to indicate their personal hesitations and conundrums than they might have in other contexts. As we saw, some owners are very aware of people in their lives who reject guns altogether and hold gun owners in some contempt. It seems likely that many interviewed are well accustomed to defending their own reasonableness when the need arises.

the founder of the Black gun club to which they still belong. He carries for personal protection in most circumstances. "[P]ersonally, I don't leave home without it," he says. "It's like my American Express card." (5) Indeed, he plans domestic travel itineraries with an awareness of different state laws about possessing and transporting firearms. However, the sense of safety he gains from carrying is not his only aim, even if it is his principal one. He also enjoys training for its own sake and noted that shooting offers him a way to take his mind off teaching and other academic responsibilities. He is proud that he encouraged his wife to take up gun carrying; in turn, she has encouraged him to work as a gun instructor alongside his full-time career:

> Initially, she was kind of skeptical. But in 2017 we were getting ready for our Valentine's date stuff and she said, 'Babe, let's go to the gun range." So I'm like, "You are definitely *my* wife." …We have some photograph [of it]. And at that particular year, the targets were hearts, they're pink and blue. …And so, we got a picture with us shooting the hearts and stuff, and it was really kind of cool. (5-6)

He has been an instructor with his own training business in the Midwest and has continued this in the Southeast. When interviewed, he was eagerly anticipating the start of his next gun class. Initially encouraged by his church pastor in the Midwest, who practiced concealed carry regularly, Albert has also trained and led church security teams at two churches where he was a member, both before and after his regional move five years ago.

In some ways, Albert speaks of firearms like any gun enthusiast might. As we saw with Mark, the rewards and significance of joining American gun culture can be tremendously important to gun owners – and even more satisfying for Christian gun owners than church itself, at least in some ways. However, Albert's enthusiasm also needs to be understood as more than just "joining the club" and finding life there. For him, even more fundamentally, carrying is also an active response to racism and to life in a culture of pervasive white supremacy. In this sense, his pilgrimage as a Christian gun owner is different than Mark's. The violence, injustice and oppression he sees in the surrounding culture are reflected in his own immediate experiences, and he carries, not out of fear of an inchoate threatening Other, but because he knows first-hand what it is to be "Othered." This was clear when he described his decision to purchase a gun for the first time:

> So, I'm at the gas station [in the urban Midwest] and these guys pull up in this big ruck with confederate flags, the pipes, there's like six of them. And I've been through

> the riots, the Rodney King riots…I grew up in the '60s in Philadelphia…and for the first time in my life, I felt unprotected. And if those guys…[pauses] and you know how they—you may not know this, but they have this thing called the 'N word stare' where they look you, you know you don't belong there. And I called my wife and I said "I just got the scare of my life. And when I come home, tomorrow we're going to go look for a firearm." (1)

Albert's pauses and redirection were atypical of his interview and suggested the ongoing power of that scare for him. When he relocated with his wife to take up a new academic post, he said,

> two of the criteria for my application [were] (1) no snow and (2) I had to be able to carry and conceal. If it wasn't a concealed carry state or "shall permit" state, I wasn't going. Because the way that 45 [i.e., President Donald Trump, 45th President of the United States] was running the country, it was going back into the 17 and 1800s. (2)[247]

For Albert, living in the South put him in close proximity to places of historic violence against Black people during the Jim Crow era, including whole towns that were burned by whites to suppress Black voter registration, sites of multiple lynchings, etc. He saw connections between that history and the rhetoric of Trump supporters:

> You know, I live pretty much in Trump country. Every place you go, right here is Trump/Pence…I don't think you can go a day without seeing a Trump flag somewhere….So, I just think that its' important that my wife and I both are able to protect ourselves when we're out and about, whether we're alone or together…and we have systems in place so we know where each [our guns] are at all times, and that kind of thing. (5)

This is made even more acute by Albert's concerns about racism in law enforcement:

> [T]hey have been tracking KKK and white nationalists joining the military and the police department since the late '70s. So we're watching now that what we have in the badged position [is] people who are racist, who use this as a way to get away with doing what they did in the 1800s. So those are the kinds of things that give me pause. (7)

[247] "Shall permit" or "may issue/shall issue" is a legal distinction that describes the prerogative of states and local municipalities to determine criteria by which gun licenses are issued. "May issue" indicates more restrictions and a higher threshold by which to qualify for a license, usually under the authority of a local police department. "Shall issue" indicates that local law enforcement cannot deny a license to those who meet (typically broader) criteria established at a higher level.

Thus, when asked a standard question from many interviews, "Are there times when you have said to yourself, "Wow, I'm really glad I had a gun?" Albert responded simply, "yes, every day." He then elaborated, "Carrying a firearm is about a lifestyle of understanding what's going on around you at all times, right? It challenges me to make sure when I walk out of a grocery store that my bag is in my left hand and not in my right [i.e., gun] hand." (8) While his situational awareness is common among personal safety gun owners, there is a notable difference. The white gun owners interviewed for this study spoke of readiness for what might happen, particularly given the sheer randomness of violence. Albert's readiness reflects the same training and techniques, but he traverses the spaces of his community with an awareness of what *has* happened to Black people and will again, perhaps to him. Violence is not "simply random," in his view, but purposeful and particularly directed at Black people, with the sources of public order squarely on the side of that violence. His perspective was echoed by Margot, a Black woman in her early 30s who lives in the urban Northeast, who said, "In 2016, *nothing* [her emphasis] changed for me."[248]

He understood the response as necessary and faithful: "I don't believe that God would introduce us to this world of violence and not give us Biblically-sound, faithful options. I don't believe he would do that." (11-12) Later, he emphasized that

> you have to understand that there are people within this fallen world who have been saved by grace and have the ability to make better decisions based on the fruits of the spirit, love, peace, joy, happiness, *et cetera*. So it is possible to live in unity and still be armed. (14)

It is not entirely clear how Albert connects his belief in "faithful options" with the fruits of the spirit. He may be making a case for the significance of Christian faith for gun owning—that a Christian's decisions will be better ones, particularly because they come out of the fruits he enumerates. He also appeared to mean that unity might, in fact, require being armed, however counter-intuitive that might seem at first. This was clearer when he said: "I don't think that carrying a firearm is a violation of 'thou shalt not kill'…I think [it] is a

[248] I recorded this statement in my interview notes. Unfortunately, no transcript is available because Microsoft Teams was not functioning properly. Margot's perspective on a range of issues will be explored in further detail below.

part of self-preservation." (16) Curiously, Albert seemed to see guns as a way to secure unity rather than as clear evidence of division. His thought might also have an eschatological dimension. Given what he knows about racial violence, he might argue that it is only through practicing self-preservation now that such unity across divisions may one day become possible.

More importantly, Albert does not simply want to survive. He wants to flourish and believes God also wants this for him and for everyone. He emphasized that engagement with the world, despite a clear sense of its many flaws, was also a source of joy for him. He does not want to be a victim of the culture's violence and injustice and saw them as all too real. But it is the violence and the injustice he rejects, not the culture. He noted,

> if I'm a branch on [the] vine, that means [Jesus] has work for me to do…does he want me to be naïve? No…Am I only supposed to study the Bible?...[Or] should I study everything that will help me be a better person that God can use to bring salvation into the world? (14-15)

As he sees it, guns help him secure his place within that work. As a student of Black history, he sees himself aligned with profound traditions of armed Black self-defense against white supremacist violence that reach back to the Jim Crow era and extend up to the present.

Principle and Practicality

For many Black Christian gun owners, self-defense is rooted in a deep commitment to their own dignity, which they understand in theological terms. This was best expressed by Crystal, a Black woman in her late 50s, who insisted on a close connection between her faith and her decision to become a gun-owner. "God chose to create people," she said, "that means that [God] found value in me, and I can't allow anyone to disrespect that...[You've] got to love your neighbor as yourself…And if I love myself, then I value myself, and I want to protect myself."(19) As Wyatt, a Black law enforcement officer in his early 60s, observed,

> you['ve] got the classic "super-Christians" who think that "my God is my shield to protect me against things." And it's hard to argue against a position based on faith rather than practicality. And so, my response is along the lines of, like, "I think that God protects us *by teaching us* to prepare ourselves." (His emphasis, Focus Group 4, 22)

Yet as he saw it, Christian faith also acts as a fundamentally moderating influence, which he also valued. As a firearms instructor in multiple professional and avocational contexts, he said that one of his most important lessons for others is "be like Jesus with a gun…It'll make [students] think. Right? Jesus isn't looking for trouble with a gun and neither should you be." (8)[249] Later on in the same interview, he recognized that, for him, this was not quite so easy as he had made it sound. He acknowledged that

> I have to constantly balance my hyper vigilance with other people's comfort and recognize that I have to walk through the world not expecting every other person to be a problem. But it's hard to do. In my own [military and law enforcement] training, I've been taught…[b]e polite to everybody you meet, but secretly have a plan to kill them. And they actually teach that…[a]nd you have to let that go. (Focus Group 4, 17)

Reading Scripture Carefully

As we saw with white gun owners, Scripture serves as an important guide for how Black Christians understand their decision to carry. Similarly, they emphasize the importance of reading and understanding it *correctly*. They also referred to some of the same passages that white gun owners had mentioned. As Charles said: "I think [where]…..turn the other cheek would come into play….really goes back to that point of defuse, get out, get out get out. [It] should be the last choice. If you have to defend, it's solely because this person continued to come." (11) For others, Scripture is intertwined with other authoritative voices in ways that suggest the complexity of tradition. Tina, a Black woman in her late 40s who lives in the urban Northeast, described driving directly behind a truck flying Trump flags, only to have one unexpectedly fall into the road in front of her car:

> I didn't drive over the flag but I didn't back up so he could get [it]. And so, I could hear my mom like, hmm, now, you know that…you're supposed to show your enemy kindness, and you know, heaps of coal…you know those lessons have been instilled in me, …but in the same token, I don't think that I'm just supposed to lay down and take violence…[or] accept injustice. (Focus Group 3,14)

[249] It is also important to note that Michael, Wyatt, and Albert were all members of the same gun-club, which Albert founded and of which Michael was the immediate past president. They had lived in the same Midwestern city at one point and were friends, so any similarities between them must be understood in that context.

Eight participants specifically alluded to "thou shalt not kill" in their interviews.[250] Tina said that while she believes in her right to defend herself and those she loves – a right to defend herself with deadly force, if necessary – she is somewhat more circumspect about that necessity. "[I]f I have the opportunity to let that person go away without ending their life, then I will give [them] that opportunity…..Unless it's life or death, I don't believe I have [a] right to take…a life. I don't." She also holds out the possibility of forgiveness for a would-be attacker: "[B]ecause I defend myself doesn't mean there isn't room for forgiveness for my attacker…It just means that I'm going to protect me."(15)

Clearly, some interviewed read their Bibles very much with guns in mind. One way this can occur was suggested in a particular moment between Michael and Wyatt in their focus group, when Wyatt was describing the challenge of leading his church security team when not all church members were comfortable with it or believed in guns, generally. Michael responded,

> can I give you the answer to that, Wyatt? Proverbs 22:3 says this: "The prudent man sees danger and hides himself. But the simple go on and suffer for it." So, some translations say, like the *New Living Translation*, "A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions, the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences." So there you have it. (Focus Group 4, 22)[251]

The use of particular translations seems to offer very different guidance, from taking shelter in one version to serving as a warrant for potential armed confrontation, in the other. Just who is being "simple" or "a simpleton" might likewise be identified in different ways, in some sense depending on which version one reads.

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[250] This is perhaps an area where the presence of the outside researcher was shaping the conversations in subtle ways. It was unclear if "thou shalt not kill" was truly important for their understanding of gun ownership for self-defense, or not terribly. Crystal even joked that it could be used against her manipulatively. "How would you respond if someone came to you and said: 'Sorry, professor, but [what about] 'Thou shalt not kill?'" She laughed and said "And then he pulls at me…then he pulls at me." (18) In most cases, it seemed invoked rather than multi-sided in most instances and made me wonder about its provenance in the thinking of those who mentioned it. Where did it come from? Did it function as a clear norm with which they had to come to terms in some way, or only loom large when they were seeking to justify their practices as Christians at my invitation? Moreover, in reflecting upon these exchanges long-after, I am struck that I did not seek to press for further thinking on any of the several occasions when it did come up, I think out a sense that do so might have seemed rude and biased on my part, rather than curious.

[251] Michael responded: "Yeah, let me write that down…I will have to use that on a Sunday." (Focus Group 4, 22-23)

Prayer

A few others mentioned the importance of prayer for their decision to carry. Donna suggested that for her, the decision to carry or not to carry on any given occasion was a matter for prayer and the Spirit's direction. She noted that sometimes it is a principled decision, but continued:

> In other times, It's just an inkling...Literally sometimes, it's as simple as something inside saying "make sure you carry today"…It's a vibe. It's a feeling. But I believe that I am to be led by the Spirit in all things, so when I say that inkling is there, it's always…I consult with the Spirit...One thing that I make certain that I do…even in those moments when I do decide to carry…I always pray. I always pray that I don't have to use it…[And] I pray that if I do, the bullets will hit what they're intended to hit. And that there's no collateral damage…that I don't put people in harm's way...I'm trusting in all that I do that I'm being led by the Spirit, and that I'm making the best decision. (7-8)

Isaac, a 40-year-old Black pastor in the urban Midwest, also described prayer practice associated with guns. He reported wrestling significantly with his initial decision to purchase a gun, first attending a citizen's police academy offered in his community and doing his own research. But most of all, he reported, "I prayed. I came in and I said, 'Lord, help me to be objective about this thing...I want to be a good steward over it." (4)[252] Recall that some gun carriers like Wyatt emphasize the "practicality" of carrying. He opposed himself to those he sarcastically "super Christians," who see God's protection as fundamentally providential. By contrast, Isaac's response suggests that other gun owners may see God as a more active and necessary source for guidance—perhaps to ensure that "practicality" does not become an end in itself.

Margot's Story

Margot also indicates a sense of connection to traditions of self-defense and self-reliance similar to Albert and, earlier, to Michael. She is single, in her 30s, and originally

[252] I had multiple conversations with Isaac. After an initial pre-interview, he participated in a focus group, then later contacted me to discuss one moment in that group with which he had not felt free to disagree out loud, but from which he dissented. This quotation is from that second one-on-one conversation.

from the rural Southeast, although she now lives in an urban center in the Mid-Atlantic. At the time of the interview, she was preparing for examinations to join the US federal government. Both her parents were ministers (as were her aunt and uncle) in non-denominational Evangelical churches she valued for being "small and family-oriented" with "maybe 50 members." "Church was *the* focal point," [her emphasis] she remembered. Though not a "prepper," Margot was raised to be prepared, particularly by her father. She recalled him warning her and her sisters that "as Black girls who would become Black women, we would need to take care of ourselves and [could not] rely on anyone else to keep us safe."[253] In addition to teaching them how to shoot, he taught them to box, saying that they "must be prepared at every point" and must not "be lulled into a false sense of safety." Consequently, while her friends at the time would joke that she "wrestles alligators and chops down trees," she remembered her training as fundamentally empowering. "My dad was actually kind of feminist," she said. "I was really blessed." She enumerated her "better sense of self" and of self-reliance because she knew how to do "things specifically reserved for males," including changing the oil in her car and trimming her own hedges, such that she has always felt "fully capable" and would not have to "seek a partner to protect me." For her, guns are a key part of that protection. "Guns are *integral*," she emphasized. "Not just comfortable. They are completely normalized." She also indicated her sense that they are necessary: "I do not think there is a woman on earth who could say she feels safe at all times. Especially a Black woman. The ways patriarchy manifests itself [are] an everyday reality we have to live with."

Like Albert, Margot deeply affirmed a call to engagement with the culture as an aspect of religious vocation, which for her further means affirming freedom in recognizing oneself as God's creation. "We are taught blind obedience," she laments. "We forget that God has given us brains, logic, community so that you do not have to sit in a vacuum or silo." She called such blind obedience "Fisher-Price Christianity," comparing it to toys for small children. Obedience, she argued, does not mean one cannot defend oneself, as if "my body is not my own." Instead, she said, "you are given agency and rights over your own

[253] This quotation is from my research notes from our interview. Unfortunately, Microsoft Teams was not functioning properly, so no recording is available.

body." By this, she seemed to suggest that these rights are God-given in ways that perhaps even churches (particularly white progressive churches) do not address.

While several Black gun owners interviewed spoke of the role of the white church in supporting white supremacy and even violence, Margot put more emphasis on the betrayal of white liberals, particularly in advocating pacifism. "White liberals don't actually understand deconstructing power in how they emphasize pacifism," she said.

> Black people never feel safe, and having someone gaslight you and tell you that you're not being *Christ-like* [her emphasis] is especially dangerous. It is distancing other people, other Christians who could be ministering [i.e., by defending Black lives], but all you're showing is ignorance and blindness to identity…[In] taking away a last line of defense, [you're] spewing ideas that fit into your worldview but detract from someone else…Non-violence is a pipe dream for privileged white people. For you to be a true ally, there are power and privilege you will have to relinquish.

Margot also underscored how white Christians can demonstrate a profound lack of empathy in their concern about violence. She noted that there can be a "certain dismissiveness of grief and what …communal grieving looks like." She continued:

> especially as Christians, if you [i.e., white Christians] don't have the empathy to understand that…something as extreme as…a violent death…broadcast for the world to see…can trigger an entire community of people in ways that you wouldn't expect…and not judge that but realize what you are seeing is, not look at [it] in fear. [T]ypically….whites see something that's happening, like a trash can on fire or a car on fire and [think] "Oh my god, they're coming for me next" [instead of] "What is this?"…[N]o one is saying [that]. And that's the approach…Instead of, "oh my God," [you say] "This is grief. This is desperation, this is people who feel unheard and feel like this what they need to do and that these are the [things] that they need to [do] to be heard and feel seen". (Focus Group 3, 19)[254]

Margot named powerful ways in which white Christianity can still participate in the work of Othering, even under the banner of dismantling violence, ostensibly for all. She was attentive to the power of white fear and seemed to see its focus as disarming Black people rather than working across communities to redeem society. For her, the pacifism of the

[254] In another focus group, Isaac mentioned "the privilege of white aggression," and continued "White aggression is always 'justified'; Black aggression is never contextualized." (Focus Group 5, notes)

Black churches during the Civil Rights Era was simply a "strategy…[designed to] win sympathy from whites."[255] In her focus group, Margot was joined in this by Tina, who said,

> I would love to see the Christian perspective [on] Malcolm X [from the pulpit] …I would love to see pastors…white and black, the Christian community as a whole saying "You know what? There will be a moment when the Malcolm X approach is the approach, and I don't want you to run away with that because we've been so indoctrinated with King being a pacifist…We maybe have to move and the movement may cause violence, and we need to be okay with that because we cannot see – I'm never going to see my sister or my brother fall to somebody else and not try to help them. That needs to be the conversation….(Focus Group 3, 17-18)

For Margot, part of the legacy of Martin Luther King was to set up Black people for ruthless tone-policing by whites and a certain expected behavior around protest.

> [E]ven in disagreement, even in protest…there was this certain way you must behave…speak and present yourself to be heard, to be respected…and if you don't fall within those lines, then I [i.e., a white Christian] have a difficult time seeing you as a whole human being, and hearing and respecting anything you have to say. (Focus Group 3, 20)[256]

However, she also made clear that she would not find much common ground in "pro-gun" churches, such as those some of those interviewed (white and Black) described. As we have seen, her sense of fear was personal and as she described it, pervasive. She recognized a need for ongoing vigilance that several other gun owners might readily have sought to share. Yet she was critical of the relationship between Second Amendment politics and Christian witness. As she saw it, fear and discussion of gun rights made it possible to avoid the transformational, reconciling work to which Christians are called on behalf of the Kingdom of God. She said,

> I think that as believers…we have the tools at our disposal to…be able to critically approach all of these conversations about….racism and sexism and xenophobia and all these things, and [yet] we're ignoring these tools because we're so busy…doing all the other things like having these conversations about "oh my, I'm going to bring my AK-47 to church…" and all these other things that are not important, that have nothing to do with people's everyday lives…[B]ecause of it, we are not only missing

[255] Again, this quotation comes from my interview notes.

[256] Similarly, Wyatt observed: "[The Republican Party and the Democratic Party are two of the largest white tribes in the US who disagree on most topics, except…that they both believe they know what's best for Black people. So whether that be the conservative…and they're the more violent [and] vocal, or the liberal, [who is] more subtle and has the bigotry of lower expectations…both sides expect a certain response to racism from Black people [i.e., forgiveness and pacifism]." (Focus Group 5, 26)

> out on…being able to set an example and build the foundation for…heaven on earth and…what the vision was that God had for this world when He first created it…[W]e are literally in a place where we can start to try to move the needle…forward, and we keep dropping the ball every time…[I]t's devastating. It's devastating. (Focus Group 3, 39)[257]

Notably, the tools Margot values are those of conversation and analysis of injustice to "build the foundation for heaven on earth." Remember that earlier, she said that guns were "integral" for her, and "not just comfortable. They are completely normalized." Yet she remained attentive to how, even at church, guns can become the center of the conversation, distracting from and perhaps derailing the Gospel. If non-violence represented a subtle form of erasure for Black experience, this did not mean that self-defense offered any simple or "more Christian" solution. White privilege was apparent in both and equally adept at manipulating the call of faith, either way.

Black Gun Owners and White Churches

Along those lines, for several of those Black Christian gun owners interviewed, it is not "enough" just to be a Christian who has decided to take a stand against the world's violence. The ways in which the church itself has been coopted by "injustice, violence, and oppression" (Walls) remains a source of tremendous pain and strenuous effort, perhaps especially so for Black Christian gun owners. For Tina, being a Christian gun owner requires steering a middle course between friends and family who reject guns entirely and the unbridled enthusiasm of some who embrace them, some of them also Christian:

> You always have to disavow them [critics] of this notion that you're just sitting on the bed watching a movie with your firearm in one hand and popcorn in the other. Right? It's not like that. And [to] people who are heavily vested in firearms, I kind of have to say, okay, I'm going to dial back your enthusiasm a little bit…Do I believe it's

[257] Many of the Black Christian gun owners interviewed also indicated that supremacist logic and even violence had taken root in white churches. For Tina, this extended even to the indifference of white Christians both to outright racism and, more simply, to acknowledging themselves as only one part of a multi-racial society. In her view, it was as if whites were saying "I'm a Christian, [but] I'm a Christian on Sunday with these folks who look just like me, and I'm totally indifferent to everyone else." Then speaking for herself, she said: "Indifference is what allows atrocity. I absolutely believe that." (28) As Anton succinctly put it, "If religion isn't revolution, then you're just getting high." (15)

> my truly God given right? Well, no, but I absolutely believe that I have the ability to use this, have this, and it's my God-given obligation to use it in the right way. (7)

For her, this is a question of "appropriate stewardship," and she expressed concern about "right wing Christians": "No one talks about stewardship over these things. They just talk about owning a whole bunch of them and that's not stewardship." (Ibid.) She both rejects some of the behaviors Wyatt might associate with the "Rambo phase" of gun ownership and feels obligated to signal to others that she has done so, although she did not specify to whom she feels that obligation. Others seemed to have a clear sense of the behaviors they disavowed, while the Christian values they affirmed were more general. For example, in trying to distinguish what made a *Christian* gun owner, Donna replied,

> I think being peace, being love in situations, and in our community wherever we are is our number one goal…I don't need to be a…[hesitates] a 'gun holding' you-know[-what]. I don't have to be so loud with it, right?...[T]here should be a humility that comes with being a follower of Christ, anyway. And so I need to carry that humility with me…while I'm carrying a weapon. I'm not going to be outlandish or...threatening people. (10)

It seems possible that, for her, what she is *not* doing seems more significant than what she is, or perhaps simply that the ways in which she qualifies her practice – the person she refuses to be – are significant for her. While the literature of gun owners and many of these interviews often emphasize that a gun "just a tool," responses such as Donna's indicate that for some, at least, the role of "gun owner" and how they intend to claim that identity, as well as imagine and play that role, remain matters of significant reflection. For similar reasons, Crystal hesitated at accepting the label of Christian gun owner:

> I'm worried about fundamentalist overzealous white supremacists who use that label…I don't see gun ownership as an aggressive thing. It's only protective. Only defenses. I would never want to be the person pulling my weapon out if I didn't need to protect something, and I think that may be the difference between a faith-based gun owner and one who is not. (8-9)

In some respects, her words bear distinct similarity to Mimi (who is white), who said that she does not "ever want to be a hero…[but rather] a survivor," and who similarly disavowed "being a vigilante" as a proper motive for carrying guns. However, Crystal's perspective is also grounded in a deeper critique of how parts of the church itself may have

been coopted, making the identity of "Christian," at least as it is widely reported, into something perhaps to reject – in the name of one's faith.

Black Gun Owners and Media Reports of Violence

However, much of this commitment to disavow a coopted church may have taken on new urgency. Almost all the Black gun owners interviewed described personal experiences of intimidation, of witnessing violence, or both. Only one (Wyatt) was formally in law enforcement and carried as part of his job (as well as off duty); three described an initial exposure to guns from parents or grandparents who hunted or lived in rural locations. However, all the Black gun owners interviewed carried for personal safety reasons (or intended to do so when life circumstances permitted). Of those interviewed, only Wyatt had been carrying longer than five years at the time of their interview. As we saw, Margot indicated that "In 2016, nothing changed for me." She identified as a Christian gun owner, even though she did not currently own a gun and had not in several years. Yet she intended to do so when her life circumstances permitted (although she did not indicate in which ways that would be clear to her). Others readily admitted that their thinking about guns had quickly, and perhaps irrevocably, changed in recent years. For some, this was related to the 2016 election and the vociferous support for President Donald Trump in the places participants lived. Maria described driving with her husband to a small lake "way back up in the boonies" on a hot Fourth of July weekend:

> As we were driving…it became redder and redder. And how I know that is because the huge shrines, MAGA and Trump pins and roadside stands that were selling the Trump paraphernalia, and we just got more uncomfortable the deeper we got into that area…[T]hey would have these – not the little…cute, little picket signs. These were…banners…across the road. And it's like, hmm, do I really want to leave my firearm in the car, get in my bathing suit, and in the middle of this?...We turned in and turned right back out…[D]o I feel like God protects us? Absolutely. But do I feel like something could happen? Absolutely. (19)

Similarly, Donna reports that

> when I see these flags…these bumper stickers…these people who clearly do not have my best interest in mind, instead of becoming bitter and angry, because I don't want to reflect that energy…that negativity that they're putting out into the world…I

> consciously pray for them. 'Cover their minds. Remove the bigotry. Send people into their lives that will soften their hearts'…I pray for white men…that the Lord puts someone in their paths that can help them [turn] the light switch on [laughs]. (16)[258]

However, just as often, Black participants mentioned widely reported acts of violence – and particularly of gun or police violence – against Black people as a major "wake up call" for them with regard to their own safety. They reported that in some cases, family members who oppose guns on principle wavered in light of high-profile acts of violence against Black people. Michael described how his mother, who has "expressed her discomfort" with his firearms, gained "a heightened awareness of violence in the world …in the age of Trumpism." When Kyle Rittenhouse shot three people at a rally protesting the death of a Wisconsin man at the hands of local police in August 2020, she called him, and as he describes, "so she was like, 'You got your gun?' So [now] she's an advocate." (Focus Group 5, 24) Crystal said, "I have friends who don't like guns…But after January 6th, they got them. Because there was this, 'Okay, these people are really crazy. So what happens if they show up at my house in the middle of the night?" (15). Anton, a journalist, wrote his mother an open letter about his decision to purchase a gun, which he shared with her upon finding out its publication was imminent, "'I'm not trying to be an alarmist or anything, but it's just like I'm doing all of these things to prepare…and protect my family. Why wouldn't I?'...And then after I said that to her, she says, 'I get it. I can't argue with you….'" (5) For him, the shooting at Mother Emmanuel AME in Charleston was particularly resonant. Similarly, the murders of Philando Castile, George Floyd, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor and Sean Bell by police, and of Trayvon Martin in Florida were all mentioned, most by more than one participant. When Anton mentioned Castile and Bell during a focus group as a catalyst for getting a gun, Albert raised both his arms and said "*Yes!*"[259] Ellis, a pastor in the semi-rural mountain South, said: "I've always been a lover of guns because I thought they were

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[258] It is notable that this may be the only instance of a personal safety gun carrier in this study, white or Black, who indicated a practice of praying for one's persecutors. By contrast, Wyatt said:

> Jesus taught forgiveness. He taught to forgive your enemies. But *Ecclesiastes* also says there's a time to forgive. Or there's a time to love, there's a time to hate. And so, the question that I've been asking myself over the years, now that this time of racialism has really intensified, when is it the time to hate? When is it the time for me to disregard loving my enemy?...Is God being schizo…I've been trying to figure out that balance." (Focus Group 4, 26-27).

[259] Focus Group Four, research notes.

cool…But as a pastor, I found myself being especially motivated to arm myself after the Charleston, South Carolina shooting." (5) He extended this motivation by establishing a church security team. "After all the South Carolina shooting, I began praying and think[ing] about [pauses]…that for me was the beginning of a new day because I saw evil." (11) Tina noted, "I have all these people in my brain, but after George Floyd [pauses]…we live in a very heavily white area – [a] very, very, very pro-Trump area. I told [my husband] 'I think I'm going to need to start carrying.'" (8) It was notable that, while Margot had grown up with guns and had been taught to use them from an early age, most of the Black gun owners interviewed had not. Several described strong anti-gun feelings until the last few years, particularly as a result of being witnesses to gun violence. To put it another way, personal experience (and the values of their families, especially their mothers) had left them *opposed* to guns. Yet when they described what had changed their minds, they noted these news stories, particularly when coupled with their experience of Trump supporters. Several noted that they generally considered themselves conservatives and had, in fact, voted for President Trump in 2016. However, their sense of personal danger had dramatically increased, in some cases serving to change significantly their perspective on guns.

Black Gun Owners and The Challenge of Not Being Subsumed

Yet what is one to do with such a danger? Many interviewed saw this as a complex question and recognized that violence itself could become a temptation, particularly through carrying. For example, Wyatt spoke of the need to coach his students through "the Rambo phase" of being a gun owner:

> I got the gun. I'm in a position to do something. Nobody had better mess with me. A young man [he corrects himself] *most concealed carriers* either get through that stage or they stop carrying a gun bun because…it's a pain in the butt. Carrying every day is a commitment that a lot of people won't make. (8)

He continued, "I've known people who upon getting a concealed carry permit start driving around looking for trouble…But trouble will come to you. And it's not like the movies. People lose gun fights all the time. You could be that guy." (10) His understanding of gun ownership had a strong sense of vocation.

By contrast, Albert did not acknowledge much concern about whether carrying could shape him in negative ways. Guns seemed to offer him a sense of control that required responsibility of him, but which faith, good judgment and training were more than adequate to secure. Other Black Christian gun owners interviewed were more circumspect and named in various ways just how much this asked of them. Some of the challenge was suggested by several interviews in which the subject of "vengeance" was introduced by participants in the study. For some, this seemed to represent the slippery slope by which gun carrying might cease to be a defense against and a critique of the world's violence and become, instead, yet a further expression of that violence. For Crystal, "becoming aggressive" was different than being prepared to defend oneself, representing in her mind "a [positive] willingness to harm" that she rejected. "[I]f someone hurt someone in my family, and I go out and buy a gun to go see them…it's no longer about protection. It's about being aggressive." She is wary of "when you're in the grip of …very strong emotion and you do something, you know, [from a] reactive place or a vengeance place…This is not protective. This is claiming something that is not yours to claim." (17-18)[260] Wyatt acknowledged that possibility, too, emphasizing the need for self-discipline as a particular requirement for those who carry. "I am the world's most polite person all the time because I recognize I bring a firearm to every argument I might get into," he said.

> The guy with the gun doesn't get to do road rage…[or] to enforce someone jumping the line at the store…because once that confrontation starts, if it escalates, you get to think about [a decision] that is a life-ending option. And you should avoid having to make those decisions. (9-10)

He circled back to the idea of the gun as a tool to observe "The gun doesn't make a jerk. It's amplified you being a jerk if you already are." (Ibid.) Yet the everyday situations and frustrations he described make the challenge of balancing readiness against leverage seem daunting. "A good person with a gun doesn't bother me at all," he said. One might well

[260] It is important to note that "vengeance" appeared in eight interviews, in five interviews with Black gun owners and three with white gun owners. However, two of the interviews with white gun owners were with participants who did not carry for self-defense. All of the Black gun owners who mentioned violence do carry for self-defense. Once again, further work is necessary to clarify whether an attention to vengeance is particularly salient among Black Christian gun-owners, or if this was a particular function of when many of the interviews were conducted in early winter 2021, just after the January 6th incursions at the US Capitol.

wonder if goodness is sufficiently defined and, however it may be, if it is sufficiently stable to justify Wyatt's confidence.

Tina described a similar moment as a precarious one, seeing it as a call and reminder of partnership with God – though this is also replete with its own challenges. She noted,

> the only thing we should ever be in pursuit of is God's will for us, right? …And as long as I keep whatever it is that I'm using in this proper perspective, in this proper place, then I'm okay…I know I have this absolute power instead of [just] saying "Lord Jesus, you guide us tonight." We will see the morning, and if anything goes wrong in the meantime, I know how to protect me and my family. (18)

She seemed to put God first as a priority or orienting commitment before all others—from which all others get their "proper perspective," and she also felt empowered by doing so, believing that to do so rightly guides her in taking steps for her own protection. A bit confusingly, she shifted direction, referring to having a gun with her as "this absolute power"; by this, it seemed she means not to suggest guns are more powerful than God, but rather that with a gun, she has a way to protect herself and her family that extends beyond a superficial request for Jesus' guidance. She has an "absolute power" in the sense a gun, rightly used according to God's will, offers a concrete solution to the dangers she faces. However, she admitted her struggles, too:

> You know, the guy that cuts me off in a Subaru…[clicks tongue].[261] All right, you know, yeah, I can give you the other cheek, right, like, I got to. I don't think I should be vindictive, right? Vengeance is mine says the Lord. I don't believe that God is calling me to be vindictive. Turning the other cheek means that I am trying to actively show you love as opposed to make sure you know you hurt my ego…[In] my everydayness, if my ego's been bruised and I react, that's not what God's calling me to do. (19)

How God helps her to maintain that "proper perspective" capable of transcending her ego in the midst of daily living, remains unclear, but again, she seems to understand relationship with God as fundamental to a healthy sense of self, with one's priorities in

[261] Tina may be indicating a particular form of perceived privilege here. She lives in an urban area but refers to a car that is often associated with white suburban upper middle class "outdoorsy" progressives. There are layers of race, class, and perhaps gender suggested in the reference, and how she imagined it as particularly galling for reasons she did not share.

order. That said, Tina also described her decision not to carry while working nights as an Uber driver, despite her husband's urging:

> I told him I wasn't going to carry and he was like, "You're not going to do Uber if you don't carry." And I said, "Listen, the idea that I could take somebody's life forever is—I can't. I can't." It's beyond…[pauses] Like in self-defense, for sure, and even, you know, if I'm an Uber driver and someone's got me in a chokehold and I'm [pauses]—I get that, but the idea that I know that this machine that I have control over, that my finger on that trigger could end everything that you do forever, your lineage, your legacy, everything afterwards. I don't want that have that kind of power. So…we ended up deciding that I would just get a knife. (26)[262]

As she said later in her focus group,

> we have to be careful …when …fear coupled with the power of the firearm is our only recourse….[In such a situation] I'm not looking at this individual like he or she is a human being…..[or] like he or she has value and purpose in the society of Christ. I'm looking at this person solely out the fear that I have of the potential of a situation. (30)

For others, the temptation a gun represents remains significant, even though they have decided to carry. That sense of "gravitational pull" (Walls) into the very violence they oppose remains a very real prospect of which they are aware. This was apparent in a fascinating moment with Isaac. After a lengthy pre-interview and then participating in a focus group with two other Black men who carry for personal safety, Isaac contacted me to clarify his perspective on something that had come up. Specifically, he wanted to reflect on a moment when Albert shared with the group that he understood guns not just as a weapon, but "a lifestyle." Accordingly, he had "summer" guns and "winter" guns that were suitable for different layers and types of clothing. When he flew on airlines, he picked routes so he could carry across state lines without issue. Finally, one further marker of how

[262] The ways in which identity is not only racialized but also gendered for Black Christian gun owners also deserves further study. Maria, a Black married woman in her late 50s, living in the Southeast, said: "I'm short and I'm female. I am of small disposition…I need a force advantage…I don't take the viewpoint that people are inherently bad or evil…[But] there is an element that just prey on other people, on the vulnerable. And if you size me up, I could easily be considered part of that vulnerable population. And then there's others who don't give a rat's behind about whether you're vulnerable or not. If they have a force multiplier, they're going to take advantage of that situation to get what they want. So, yeah, there's a lot of pros in being able to even the scales, so to speak." (4) Later, she also named the importance of carrying "responsibly," particularly because of the connection of guns with domestic violence. (7) She did not elaborate, but the moment seemed to suggest that "evening the scales" against very real threats was far from *carte blanche* for gun owners, who might well participate in other forms of (particularly gendered) violence.

deeply built into his lifestyle guns were, he reported, was that before moving to take up a new job in a different state, he had routinely carried a concealed weapon while playing tennis. At the time, the group encountered this with surprise but respect—even admiration. When I asked if there were people "who get tempted or fall into sin because of a gun?" they did not appear to think so—voicing the opinion that sin might come from anywhere.

Later, Isaac wanted to reengage that question. "I heard a kind of brief concession that, you know, like, 'idolatry' could be a temptation. But I heard…for the most part that there wasn't much of a temptation," he said. "I do think there's a temptation…because all guns in themselves are not intrinsically evil [but] the use of it creates …an intrinsic power differential…it's like…money is not evil but, man, you know, the love of it, right?" (Isaac 2, 2-3). He continued,

> the gun becomes the great equalizer in some cases…if I'm being bullied…if I'm in a gang territory… if I've been terrorized, there's something about pulling the gun and the consequent reaction that somebody is now afraid...I can now impact a circumstance, and even influence a person's emotional state by simply…[pauses] not even pull it but by showing it. So to me, for us to deny the history of the power dynamics that come with guns in this country, to me I think is disingenuous. (3)

For him, this extended also to Albert's decision to wear a gun while playing tennis:

> [E]ven if everyone that he was playing that that day…was a person of color...tennis is still socially white space…And so, there's a level where…affirmation…comes from being able to traverse boundaries, not only socially, but in this case…safety sports boundaries...there's a level, I think, of being able to traverse boundaries there and be like, "yeah, what are you going to be do about it?" (8)

Many Black gun owners interviewed found ways to name power differentials between white and Black people, and several indicated that the breadth of that difference was a significant factor in their decision to purchase firearms. What is particularly notable about Isaac's remarks is his critical perspective on "equalizing." He framed this differently than Crystal did when she said, "[God] found value in me, and I can't allow anyone to disrespect that." Isaac seems to mean the term somewhat ironically, anticipating cycles of terror and reaction rather than the deep self-respect as God's creation that Crystal seeks to name. In that respect, Isaac suggests that in his eyes, Albert's gun on the tennis court was a

provocation rather than an act of self-affirmation.[263] Although his language through this section of the interview was not explicitly theological, it is important to recall that his initial desire was to clarify his answer to my question about temptation. He also explained that he had not wanted "to buck against anybody else's conviction" by disagreeing openly. (2)[264] Again, like Albert, he is a Black gun owner who carries for personal safety (and he is also from the urban Midwest). However, he seemed to see the very real possibility of how a desire to reject the world's violence might yet be subsumed by that violence.

Summing Up: Black Safety

The Black Christian gun owners interviewed were all either exclusively or primarily carrying for personal safety. Like many white personal safety gun owners, they drew on Scripture and theology in a range of ways to frame their practices. They saw faith as requiring a different sort of behavior from gun owners—a level of probity or forbearance that guided them and differentiated them from other less scrupulous gun carriers.

However, the values expressed in the carrying of Black Christian gun owners were also distinctive. Their sense of themselves as "Other" in a white dominant culture was significant. White Christians did not articulate their sense of themselves as potential targets of violence in the same way. First, few whites in this study shared similar stories of having been threatened. By comparison, white fear was more hypothetical. Second, Black Christians expressed a more complex understanding of American Christianity, in general. They recognized that non-violence was a value close to other Christians, including their parents, in ways that seemed to require more formal reckoning. However, Black Christians were aware of affirming their own dignity as God-given in a religious landscape where other self-declared Christians did not share a commitment to affirming them. At best, this made such Christians passive supporters of violence against people of color. At worst, it

[263] The either/or is a more accurate reflection of Isaac's position in the interview. The possibility that the Albert's act might be *both* self-affirmation and a witting or unwitting act of provocation seems possible, although Isaac did not raise it in his interview.
[264] This is another moment when I regret failing to ask for a participant to elaborate.

might signal their active involvement in racist violence. Neither was understandable, much less acceptable for Christians, according to the Black Christians interviewed.

Conclusion

The participants in this study showed a range of perspectives on their guns as well as on how their faith guided the ways they used guns. For some, guns were a tool that allowed them to feel part of a larger creation. Other gun owners emphasized more important defensive uses, whether for themselves, for others, or both. Many Black gun owners further signaled deep criticism of the white institutional Church for emphasizing non-violence in ways that seem indifferent to the vulnerability of Black lives in a racist society; however, they also acknowledged the importance of faith in guiding their practices in carrying a lethal weapon. In the final chapter, I will seek to reflect critically on these different aspects of faithful gun practice and understand the "culture of armed citizenship" in theological terms.

Chapter Five

Blurred Encounter, Comfort Zones, and the Common Good

Introduction

As the previous chapter indicates, American Christian gun owners are deeply engaged in theological work as they seek to understand their own practice of carrying guns. They see doing so as a faithful response to human distress in a world full of danger, certainly for themselves, and often for others. We have also seen how personal a decision they understand carrying to be, and their strong sense that not everyone should. Some described carrying in terms reminiscent of a vocation to which one is called. For most, drawing on Scripture and church tradition, as well as faith practices such as prayer. helped them make sense of why and how they carry, whether they saw a kind of "call" to carry, or not. For some, this is a matter of personal faith and is largely private; for others, it is shared more widely, as part of presentations or participation in professional settings, gun clubs, or churches.

In Chapters Two and Three, however, there was some indication that such sharing was not widespread. For example, our review of the sociological literature on gun owners had a great deal to say about the relationship between guns, meaning making, and social location, yet little awareness of theological reflection or conversation among gun owners, even as their religious affiliation was noted. Conversely, a review of denominational statements, formal theology and popularly-directed attempts to think theologically about guns showed little connection to the experiences of those who carry them (a point to which we will return).[265] This suggests that there has not been much effort to listen to Christian gun owners, much less hear them, even in Christian circles. It also suggests a certain degree of challenge in moving from the specific testimonies of individuals to broader reflections for the Church as it seeks to understand the role of belief in the dilemma of

[265] A significant exception is the "anti-media" of Christian gun owners, themselves, which seems intended as a resource for those already convinced (and prepared to reject the silencing of mainstream media) rather than an attempt to convince new adherents. See Brian Anse Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media: Informational Sociology of the American Concealed Weapons Carry Movement*. (*Sine loco*: Goatpower Publishing/Arktos Media, 2014).

modern gun violence. In addition, how Christian voices might go on to participate in public discussions on guns with fellow citizens, Christian or not, remains unclear for many complex reasons.

This chapter will attempt to identify several of those reasons and will explore the challenge of public conversation, particularly in light of the deep, personal theological construction we saw in the last chapter. Unfortunately, the remedy is not as simple as filling in the "blind spot" that academic scholarship and denominational theology seem to have developed about Christian gun owners. Christian gun owners, it will be argued, have significant blind spots, too. Accordingly, what they say and what they value need to be heard with some sense of what remains unsaid—and where someone's values seem to stand in the context of that silence. Any more productive conversation would seem to lie on the other side of that.

Enculturating Blindness

As we saw in the last chapter, I have drawn on Walls' understanding of "inculturation" from missiology in trying to account for how Christian gun owners engage the world in a range of ways. For example, we argued that the hunters interviewed exhibited what Walls describes as an "indigenizing principle," in which the Gospel finds new expression and offers a path to God, even enabling "a culture's best self to flourish."[266] Thus, in this context, it accepts as real that a hunter might experience themselves as part of a larger and more wonderful creation, thanks to hunting and the tools it requires. As we saw, for some hunters, that went hand in hand with a larger sense of stewardship, including compassionate care for suffering animals as well as humility about one's own needs for sustenance and survival, and what these require. The hunters see what they do as life-affirming and as a reminder of their own creatureliness.

[266] Of course, the question of according to whom what is "best" and what is "flourishing," and with what consequences, remains to be determined. What Walls means is that Christianity can learn from new contexts and take new linguistic and cultural forms, and yet remain both recognizable and "authentic," even if that is not all that happens in situations of encounter and even though those situations remain multi-layered, as we will argue.

This leads to a second point: carrying for personal safety is *different*. It bears similarity to what Walls refers to as "the Pilgrim Principle," in which Christianity represents a critique of the culture in which it finds itself, seeking to challenge the culture's shortcomings and "invite it toward a life in which injustice, violence and oppression are overcome."[267] There is glaring irony at the heart of such a claim, and we will return to it momentarily. But as we saw, all of those interviewed qualified their sense of what it was to own and carry guns in significant ways. Some admitted that they still wrestled with the decision, framed in terms of the responsibility they understood it to entail, and indicated they felt it was important to do such wrestling in an ongoing way. Their practice was emphatically *praxis*, which is to say, a deeply value-laden activity, and not just a seemingly neutral form of "doing." The values they identified as at issue (and how so) took different forms or were most acute in different moments, but they indicated a widely shared sense of being both a gun carrier in a world full of risk, and moreover, a sense of being *this* kind of gun owner (defined variously) rather than *that* one. As most saw it, the difference reflected the guidance of their faith, both to lead toward the good and caution against the bad.

To some extent, then, if a "pilgrim principle" was truly operating, it might be identified on at least two levels. It suggests how Christian gun owners view themselves as opposing and even dismantling the violence that they believe surrounds them. Yet for some, this also demands an internal struggle to maintain the righteousness necessary to remain on the side of the angels. As Albert argued, "A person who doesn't know Jesus carrying a gun is going to respond entirely differently than someone who does…They're going to be 'no holds barred' if [they're] not motivated by the holy." (11) Some admitted that such a "hold" may be precarious. Several acknowledged the temptation to vengeance, particularly should daily encounters quickly escalate, naming such familiar situations as being cut off in traffic or while waiting to check out at the grocery store when someone else jumps ahead.[268]

Finally, Walls recognizes that cultural influences in situations of encounter go both ways, and that Christianity can become a "[prisoner] of culture…succumbing to the

[267] Walls, *Missionary Moment*, as quoted in Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 97-98.
[268] It is curious how both of these examples, which we saw earlier, are keyed to moments when common conventions around order, and specifically "waiting one's turn" are being violated.

gravitational pulls that in every culture lead to injustice, violence, and oppression."[269] This is where the ironies multiply. In a general way, Walls names how Christianity can operate as a force for values opposed by the Gospel. However, even as he names the reality of impure, or sinful institutions, he seems to find the source of that corruption at the feet of the unchurched Other and their world, which have pulled the Church away from its own true self. As a matter of history, this is especially problematic in the case of guns and Christianity in the New World. As we saw in Chapter Two, how guns contributed to and perhaps precipitated the terms of colonial encounter and continental conquest – in what sense they succumbed to gravitational pulls and in what sense they introduced them – opens a host of important questions. If Christian faith came to the New World hand in hand with guns, in what sense can it be construed as polluted by them from the outside?

More importantly, Walls' model can introduce nuance into how "gun culture" and Christian faith might intersect only if one concedes a certain neutrality about the presence of guns in the first place. Clearly, the gun owners in this study have done so, if to various degrees and in somewhat distinct ways. It is true that there is no moment to which one might somehow return and revisit the decision to "introduce guns." It is also true this occurred alongside the introduction of the Gospel in the Americas, and that the two have always been interwoven to a greater or lesser extent (and for good as well as for ill, as Walls' framework suggests). However, it also means that when American Christians talk about violence, guns have always been on both sides of the encounter between the world and the Gospel. They make alternatives difficult to imagine.

Learning from "Blurred Encounter"

That said, much more needs to be said about how such alternatives might begin to be imagined, particularly as a better account of the blind spots helps to identify important areas for closer attention and more focused work. In practical theology, John Reader has brought our attention to moments of "blurred encounter" as especially significant in this

[269] Again, Walls, *Missionary Moment*, as quoted in Kreider, 98-99.

respect.[270] In his subsequent work with Helen Cameron and Victoria Slater, such a moment is identified as

> a pastoral situation in which boundaries are likely to be crossed and where Christians will need to make a judgement as to the appropriate course of action. This implies the presence of other complications. These might include: the possibility of a compromise of one's faith position, the need to cross a boundary of some sort, geographical, cultural or ideological; the taking of risks in order to respond creatively; the knowledge that some people may be opposed to or offended by the decision taken. To use contemporary language, the minister or practitioner will find themselves "outside their comfort zone" and out in unknown or unfamiliar territory, where previous rules and conventions do not easily apply.[271]

Like Walls' description of "inculturation," the concept of "blurred encounter" seeks to describe how faith and world meet, although more episodically and experientially. As part of a formal process of theological reflection, it offers the moment when some form of negotiation is happening between the two in a way that might (and ought) be made more explicit. Moreover, Cameron *et al*., note that such moments are not limited to clergy, ecclesial contexts, nor even moments when a Christian crosses paths with someone of another faith or none. Blurred encounter can occur in a "workplace, leisure, or family setting," and even between Christians.[272]

This is helpful in any number of ways. First, in our present context, it calls to our attention the ways in which Christian gun owners may understand something *pastoral* at stake in moments when boundaries are crossed and judgements about appropriate courses of action need to be made. I would argue that what constitutes the "pastoral" ought to be considered broadly, and not limited to moments when Christian faith becomes explicit in some public way. The gun owners in this study have suggested the many ways in which they grapple with their practice as Christians, such that any situation is open to significant *internal* Christian reflection or scrutiny. What compromises or reflects their faith is important to them. Judging an appropriate course of action is work they describe as constant and central to their practice as gun owners, and they understand it as Christian

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[270] See John Reader, *Blurred Encounters: A Reasoned Practice of Faith*. (Cardiff: Aureus Publishing, 2005), and especially Helen Cameron, John Reader, and Victoria Slater, *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing: Pastoral Practice and Public Theology*. (London: SCM Press, 2012).
[271] Cameron *et al*., *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing*, 17-18.
[272] Ibid., 18.

work. Furthermore, much of it occurs well outside the confines of their faith group and is not necessarily accountable to that group. If a gun owner sees someone of another race and feels threatened, they may well grapple (then or later) with whether or not Jesus would want them to "pull" on that person. How or even if they bring this experience back to their faith community for support or confession does not mean the moment was not Christian *for them* in important ways.

Second, blurred encounter reminds us that boundaries come in many forms, "geographical, cultural, ideological," etc. This was evident in the accounts of participants, who named many such boundaries. Their most immediate concern tended to focus on *geographical* boundaries—home, automobile, church—and they largely understood themselves as defending rather than crossing them. Yet their sense of the ubiquity and randomness of violence also suggested their recognition that they could not help but cross into harm's way as they went out into the world.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that gun owners' only concerns were physical safety in geographical spaces. As we have seen, when I asked Albert if there was ever an occasion when he said to himself, "wow, I'm really glad I had a gun," his answer was simple: "Every day." In ways that both disclosed and refused disclosure, he was not describing a particular experience of incursion across boundaries, like finding himself in the wrong neighborhood, but seemed to be suggesting something more existential. When Bruce described carrying even in posted "gun free zones," trusting that if anything happened, they would thank him later, he was crossing a legal and ideological boundary just as much as a geographical one.

As Eric Stoddart has made clear, surveilling and being surveilled, identifying and assessing potential threats among different populations, all necessarily engage significant questions of belonging and of the terms, framed theologically and otherwise, of participation in society.[273] In a hopeful vein, the occasions for blurred encounter abound, even in the carefully zoned world of a surveillance society. The opportunity for creative response and the challenge of deciding how to respond to rules and conventions – knowing how to calculate the risk for doing so – have at least some degree of theological traction.

[273] Eric Stoddart, *The Common Gaze: Surveillance and the Common Good.* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

Of more concern, however, is how people come to understand incursions into their comfort zone, particularly as people of faith. As we saw, gun owners are far from passive recipients of religious tradition that tells them what and how to believe. They draw on their experience to understand Scripture and the many forms of God-talk, such that they are not afraid to declare tradition wrong in some cases or about certain things. This suggests that a situation of "blurred encounter" is not necessarily a liberatory space. When faith may be compromised, when rules and conventions do not seem to apply, what may result is a faith reconstituted on safer, more comfortable – perhaps more defensible – grounds. The expansive possibility in encounter may result in retraction, instead. Recalling Stoddart, how might we understand gun carrying in a context where gun owners reserve the right to do their own social sorting, not trusting the surveillance society to do it for them? Is that revolutionary or reactionary? In a world where "Stand Your Ground" legislation leaves it up to individuals to determine when they feel sufficiently threatened by another to use deadly force against them, what is a "comfort zone"? Where one belongs, according to whom, and how one might seek to respond to discomfort are highly complex questions.

Finally, we might well consider how the presence of a gun is part of what "blurs" an encounter. None of those interviewed practiced "open carry," even where it was legally permitted to do so. It was generally seen by participants as needlessly provocative, frightening to non-gun owners, or even inviting targeting by those intent on harm (since an opposing gun would need to be "neutralized" first). Yet blurred encounters are not limited to scenarios in which someone else specifically *sees* a person's gun. There are risks it permits, perhaps even creatively, in knowing it is there. When Mimi described doing the night deposit after the close of business at the rodeo where she worked, her gun provided her the reassurance that she would get home safely to her children, whom she understands as God's primary job for her. In less explicitly faithful terms, Wyatt (a law enforcement officer) described walking into a convenience store and seeing two suspicious young men, which made him decide to move quickly and quietly, taking a "tactical stance" in full view

(e.g., clear sight lines to both men, the register, and the door, gun hand free and at his side, etc.) The two suspicious young men saw this and promptly left the store.[274]

Less heroically, being someone who carries a gun can offend others, with fellow Christians representing no exception. To be known as a gun carrier can lead to blurred encounters in which one has to defend and explain the sincerity of one's faith with any number of others, including other Christians Anton and Ellis reported this with family and fellow church members, and which Justin, Trevor and Steve particularly mentioned with reference to their churches' decisions around establishing armed church security teams.[275] The responses of participants in this study suggest that, if the church understands comforting to be part of its mission, then protecting it as a "comfort zone" – doing what is necessary to secure it so that comfort might be offered and received – is important. Yet if guns make some in the church *uncomfortable*, how is that mission which would foreground "offering comfort" to be understood? And what of the stranger who is looking to belong? Wyatt described one occasion during the 2020 Presidential election when two young white men visited his predominantly Black church, dressing and acting "suspiciously." Again deploying a subtle "tactical stance," he and other members of his church security team were able to make their presence known, and after a short time, the visitors got up and left without addressing anyone. If suspicion is one form of "situated knowledge" that comes through practice, it is difficult to say in this circumstance if it represented worldly intuition in the service of faith or paranoia chasing away would be pilgrims. How the church community understood the moment and what it took from it as a result were also occasions of blurred encounter worth engaging.

[274] Crystal, a Black woman who travels alone two hours each way by car through the rural South for work, described her practice of "brandishing without brandishing" if, for example, she had to stop for gas. She had a long repertoire of ways that someone watching her might glimpse her handgun, if only for a moment, and thereby be deterred from attempting any threatening activity.

[275] It would be an invaluable contribution to future research if a congregation were willing to engage in formal theological action research around establishing an armed, civilian security team. The opportunity to offer more depth around how belief is shared within the context of ongoing relationships would be tremendously important.

Managing Zones Comfortably as a Christian: The Work of Prudence

When encounters "blur," how do Christian gun owners decide how best to respond? Chapter Four suggests a variety of ways in which they see this theologically. Significantly, one of the key findings of speaking with American Christian gun-owners was their emphasis on the *responsibilities* inherent in carrying firearms. In their interviews, almost all had little to say about their right to carry a gun, and a great deal about how to do so *properly*.[276] Moreover, to do so properly as they articulated it had less to do with learning a repertoire of techniques (although technique had its place and some were even teachers of it), and more to do with the kind of person one was and how a firearm might shape and be shaped by that. As Albert explained it, "Guns are a total lifestyle." To which we might well add that it is a lifestyle they understand *in faithful terms*.

In order to clarify how this is so, it is helpful to expand the discussion by incorporating a concept from formal theology: the cardinal virtue of prudence, particularly as it is formulated in a broadly Thomistic tradition. At first, this may seem curious for a study that focuses almost exclusively on the voices of Evangelical Protestants. As we saw in Chapter Four, when the word came up in one brief exchange between participants, they were quoting Scripture, not Aquinas, Aristotle, or any academic voice, much less Roman Catholic teaching. That said, the term is helpful heuristically to clarify the work in which the participants of this study were actively engaged. When a comfort zone is left or a boundary crossed, deciding what one ought to do as a Christian is, in some sense, the work of prudence. It is a way to name the virtue by which broad principles meet local conditions.

As Romanus Cessario, O.P., notes in a reading of the parable of the wise and foolish maidens (Matthew 25:1-13), "Jesus compares those ready to welcome the reign of God with five prudent maidens, whose virtuous character primed them even for the unexpected arrival of the bridegroom. The principal point of the parable illustrates *the kind of*

[276] This was a modest surprise to me from the interviews. There is a stereotype of Christian gun-owners as polemically asserting their "God-given right to bear arms," and starting out, I expected to speak to several such people. They turned out to be quite rare. Based on my conversations, I cannot say if this suggests that the right to bear arms is not considered to "God given," after all, or rather if the assumption that it is rests so deeply that it is not a matter for discussion. Of course, it is also possible that this might have felt uncomfortable to assert to a researcher.

preparedness Jesus expects of his disciples."[277] He continues, "The virtue of prudence ensures that there exists between the intelligence of the moral agent and the truth of the moral law an authentic and intrinsic conformity," adding later that it, "…transforms knowledge of moral truth into specific virtuous actions which are not burdensome, that is, which do not include friction, internal strife, forcing oneself."[278] This is helpful because it reminds us that prudence means something more than just circumspection or caution, even in the name of Jesus. It is about the "fittedness" (to use H.R. Niebuhr's word) of the Christian person for the moment in which they find themselves, grounded in the certainty that it is possible to be so.

Indeed, many gun owners seemed to hope for just such a fit. For example, when Wyatt instructs his firearms students that "when they have a gun, they need to be like Jesus with that gun," he describes this as a core orientation they need to have in order to carry properly—the sort of people they need to be. Secular firearms training will often teach people carrying to see the world at "condition yellow," that is, it trains them to be aware at all times of their environment as a place of heightened risk. Wyatt is placing the imitation of Jesus in the context of that same heightened risk. He sees a call for "the kind of preparedness Jesus expects," in such a place, as Cessario puts it. To put it differently, the dangers of the world do not simply call for a gun, that is, a certain kind of "tool." They call for a certain kind of person.

What kind of person? Many gun owners interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of restraint as a central characteristic of a specifically Christian gun-owner. Open-carry (which is widely legal) or "brandishing" (showing a firearm in a warning or threatening manner, which is often illegal) were frequently named as particularly improper for Christians to do, largely because they were deemed to be prideful. Several Black gun owners described experiences of encountering menacing or disrespectful behavior that felt pointedly racialized, and how having a concealed firearm meant it was more important than ever to walk away instead—and how important they felt it was to understand that. Clearly, such experiences remain painful and remembered long after. However, as they

[277] Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*. 2nd Edition. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 1. My italics.
[278] Cessario, *Moral Virtues*, 9, 80.

explain it, what Cessario would describe as "friction, internal strife, forcing oneself" are not with regard to how one ought to have responded with one's gun, the moment when "the truth of the moral law and the intelligence of the moral agent" meet. Rather, they suggest the great challenge of encountering and managing the ongoing toll of persistent racism. Similarly, Josef Pieper has described prudence as

> the perfected ability to make decisions in accordance with reality…[and therefore it] is the quintessence of ethical maturity…An education to prudence means: to objective estimation of the concrete situation of concrete activity, and the ability to transform this cognition of reality into concrete decision.[279]

Knowing what to do and what not to, given the likelihood of bodily harm one might suffer (and mete out) calls for the very sort of "ethical maturity" that Pieper describes. As Mark A. Wilson notes, humility is vital, because it "facilitates an accurate assessment of one's agency and the limits thereof…[it] reflects the recognition of human finitude and renounces an aggrandized sense of agency."[280] In Chapter Four, we noted how some Black gun owners put particular emphasis on resisting the temptation of vengeance, most notably in everyday situations where the impulse to "equalize" disrespect abruptly became strong. The prudence for which many of those interviewed in this study seemed to be reaching was often especially in such a capacity for renunciation. If Wyatt urged his firearms students to "be like Jesus," much of what he appeared to mean was a call to such humility—a deliberate rejection of a certain kind of self-aggrandizement. Important as it was to know when to walk away from a physical altercation one might well lose, knowing when to walk away for one's own *moral* good was even more important.

Then what does it clarify if we put gun practices in critical conversation with the theological doctrine of prudence? In a general way, prudence offers a way to describe the connection between one's faith commitments and one's everyday life—the promise that a theologically coherent everyday life is possible. It is also helpful to note that prudence seems to offer the further hope that the fit between faith and everyday life might be essentially seamless – that "perfected ability" and capacity for "objective estimation of the

[279] Josef Pieper, *The Cardinal Virtues*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 31.
[280] Mark A. Wilson, "Moral Grief and Reflective Virtue," in William Werpehowski and Kathryn Getek Soltis, eds., *Virtue and the Moral Life: Theological and Philosophical Perspectives*. (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 67.

concrete situation of concrete activity" are possible.[281] The gun owners in this study seemed to hope for something much like that. Their processes around threat assessment and effective weapons handling were not only about technical mastery but were emphatically value-laden—for some, they were almost *demanded*, if not by the Gospel, then by any meaningful commitment to living out the Gospel in a dangerous world (as they understood it). It is in this sense that theological prudence seems to offer an apt description for their grappling.

However, when we consider prudence in the context of "comfort zones," new blind spots begin to appear. As we saw, much of the promise of a category like prudence, fully attained, is that with its perfected ability, discomfort scarcely need ever arise. It is not a picture of seamless technique, but seamless living despite what surprises or challenges might be posed by circumstance. It recalls Walls' "pilgrim principle," in which one's Christian commitment remains steadfast, embodying alternatives to the surrounding culture. By embodying the Christian life so deeply, one seemingly avoids the discomfort of bumping up against people or situations that would offer any true challenge that life. Its vision seems to be that there would be no *blurred* encounters, just encounters. It leaves little room for transformation.

Shadow Virtues

Blurred encounter suggests that possibility lies in attempting something more risky. Moreover, one might ask how minimizing risks also necessarily forecloses some possibilities for how Christians might engage with strangers. How do they keep the costs in clear view? For example, Scott Bader-Saye has cautioned against some of the ways in which theological imaginations can baptize their own fears and defend themselves vigorously against the claims of anyone else. He writes,

> disordered and excessive fear has significant moral consequences. It fosters a set of shadow virtues, including suspicion, preemption, and accumulation, which threaten traditional Christian virtues such as hospitality, peacemaking, and

[281] Again, the terms are Pieper's. See *Cardinal Virtues*, 31.

> generosity….[O]ur preoccupation with safety provides a temporary, though artificial, solution to our moral fragmentation.[282]

How are gun owners to know when their fear is healthy, an extension of prudence, and when it becomes "disordered and excessive"? When it does, one's resolve to pull a trigger becomes a vice rather than a virtue. For example, in Midwest Focus Group 2, one participant described his church's decision to commit $10,000 to the purchase of a special laminate on its office windows, designed to keep intact the structural integrity of the window glass in the event of a shooting – effectively meaning that someone seeking to shoot their way into the building would be delayed for perhaps as long as an additional 60 seconds. (The participant approved of the decision.) But is this this an expression of hospitality and peacemaking, or the very opposite? More to the point, perhaps, how did the consensus around this course of action emerge? As we have seen, sources of authority, theological norms and interpretations of experience come together in messy and complicated ways. The "shadow virtues" can so easily become a way of life, and a Christian one, at that, such that something like the fullness of friendship with God lived with the fruits of the spirit becomes a life to which only "sheep," whose fearlessness takes the form of naivete rather than prudence or confidence, might aspire.[283]

Bader-Saye also notes that Christian life as the Gospels describe it is inherently risky, and it is interesting to ponder how Christian gun owners might understand such a claim. Bader-Saye quotes Richard Hays: "The New Testament writers consistently employ the pattern of the cross precisely to call those who possess power and privilege to surrender it for the sake of the weak." Bader-Saye goes on to argue,

> Christian discipleship, that is, following Jesus, will mean surrendering the life that masquerades as security in order to love the neighbor and welcome the stranger. It will mean avoiding the safe path in order to pursue the good. But in a culture of fear, we find such risks more difficult, since our natural instincts lead us to close in on ourselves when we face danger.[284]

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[282] Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 26.

[283] Bader-Saye makes an excellent point in describing "the bliss of ignorance" as "a kind of recklessness" in its own right, particularly because it is a form of fearlessness that "can arise through a passive denial of the real dangers that exist…." As we have seen, this is what prudence seeks to engage. He would also emphasize that what makes a danger "real," and how that can be understood theologically, are powerful questions. See Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus*, 45.

[284] Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 197, as quoted in Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus*, 22; the subsequent quotation from Bader-Saye is found at that same location. Along

It may belabor the point to observe that for many Christian gun-owners, it is the fearlessness of the naïve they would likely identify as a "life that masquerades as security." As they see it, their willingness to do what is necessary is not a form of closing in on themselves, but a commitment to keeping things open, and for some, a way of following Christ's example. However, they might well qualify that openness by suggesting that not all neighbors ought to be loved, and not all strangers should be welcomed. For other Christians, it is perhaps hard to know what to make of that. The focus groups in this study suggest that some Christian gun-owners see that caution as a plain reading of Scripture, while others see it as a claim from Christian tradition; likely few would dispute it. Yet Bader-Saye's call to avoid "the safe path in order to pursue the good" is clearly a vision of the transformation to be found in blurred encounter. He reminds us of how many different forms of "safety" – physical, emotional, ideological, etc. – gun owners may be defending in deciding to carry their firearms.

Managing the "Common Bad" and Foregoing a Common Good

This is where David Hollenbach's work on the Common Good offers a significant diagnosis. The shadow virtues described by Bader-Saye recall Hollenbach's caution that

> when fear of…threats sets the tone, interaction with people who are different is perceived as a danger to be avoided. Serious interaction and mutual vulnerability can seem like a "common bad' than a good to be shared in common. Defense of one's turf becomes the first requirement of a good life…[while] a positive experience of life together, common knowledge of what a good life is, and the philosophical idea of the common good all seem to evanesce together….This raises the spectre that we have fallen into a downward spiral in which awareness of differences leads to conflict, which in turn leads to fear, more conflict, more defensive boundaries, and onward to deepened perceptions of difference.[285]

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the same lines as Bader-Saye, a much earlier article by Catholic theologian William P. George wonders "…whether, in today's society, guns function as 'anti-sacramentals', that is, as bearers of false hope of security, of life, of dignity, of godly power. We might ask whether guns function as idols of despair." See William P. George, "Guns and the Catholic Conscience," in *Chicago Studies*, Vol 35, no. 1 (April 1996), 88.

[285] David Hollenbach, *Common Good and Christian Ethics,* 18, 21

As we have seen, while many of the gun owners interviewed enjoy owning and using guns, they do not find joy in carrying for safety. Many admit that the decision to do so was initially difficult and remains so. Yet as they see it, their experiences of "life together" in a world of difference tend to confirm the brokenness and danger that have led them to "strap" in the first place, and to devote themselves to a discipline of sorting others and assessing the threat they might pose. Hollenbach cautions against how "awareness of differences leads to conflict" and then on to fear, yet one wonders about how that awareness becomes internalized and below the level of conscious awareness, with an individual's comfort zone becoming ever smaller, more instinctual, and dangerously reactive. It also seems uncertain how many others a person's comfort zone can manage to accommodate.

We have noted how some personal safety gun owners seemed to see themselves akin to "pilgrims" in a hostile culture. It was also clear in Chapter Four that many gun owners feel a strong call to defend themselves and those they love, above all, with some of them going further to also sense a call to defend the vulnerable, if called upon by circumstance. Bearing Bader-Saye's shadow virtues in mind, it seems possible to imagine a world that comes to be ever more full of vulnerable persons, and yet in which the eligibility of any particular vulnerable person for care and protection in any given circumstance gets ever more difficult to recognize, especially as comfort zones are shrinking. This leads us to another observation that is perhaps implicit in managing the "common bad": gun owners have reserved *for themselves* the responsibility to assess vulnerabilities and eligibility for protection. While many emphasized the importance of drawing their weapon only as a last resort, they have determined that, ultimately, they are the ones who must make that decision. At a later point, courts of law may decide if their decision was "correct," as a matter of law. In this study, faith seems to be operative for gun owners, but it challenged their comfort zones in some ways and not in others. For them, faith offered a way of framing (and perhaps in assessing) their own intentions. It seemed to speak particularly to the consciences of those interviewed—their conscience about what the common bad of a dangerous world asked of them personally, and about what they owed the people they love in light of that danger (or perhaps to God, who had given them these particular people for whom to care). Consequently, it prompted them to take their comfort zones *more*

seriously, to listen more carefully to what their discomfort was telling them, and to defend themselves more rigorously as it directed.

What this suggests is that a sense of the common bad may have more immediate traction than the call to the common good. Moreover, the variety of responses to the common bad seems, at best, to be a vision of the *collective* good – a sum of personal goods. By contrast, in appealing to a *common* good, Hollenbach calls our attention to forms of the good that can only be realized together, and which both inculcate and contribute to a more thoroughgoing solidarity truly capable of sustaining human flourishing. Moreover, he is not convinced that any other way of ostensibly pursuing the good can truly serve that end. Thus, for example, the Christian gun owners in this study who own and/or carry out of a concern for personal safety have mentioned the danger of "bad neighborhoods" in nearby cities as a justification for their practice with guns. However, few white "defensive" gun owners identified issues of distributive injustice as an area of personal commitment or argued for a form of contributive justice over and above the broader (if more vague) social benefit of their being personally armed.

That said, the small group of hunters in this study might be seen differently. In their case, the obligations of commutative justice could be seen as present in their sense of obligation to duties such as "feeding their family;" of contributive justice in recognizing themselves as dependent parts of a larger creation. Moreover, some also understood their own responsibility to live with minimal ecological footprint by feeding their families locally and without industrial processing, as a form of distributive justice that reduced the collective ecological burden, however infinitesimally. This suggests that while the justification of guns as "just a tool" needs to be evaluated critically, there are contexts within which guns are understood more instrumentally, as part of a vision of the greater good—something that is, in principle, larger than one's immediate circle of concern.

By contrast, the defensive gun owners in this study tended to understand their agency as, most immediately, commutative, as a form of obligation to defend their nearest and dearest; some further articulated a form of contributive justification, understanding their agency as gun carriers as a form of unsolicited and undeclared defense of a broader public order (in the case of those choosing to practice concealed carry). Hollenbach's vision of the common good problematizes such a claim, pushing us to clarify how it is we would

understand it as oriented toward others, rather than simply a thin justification of the "common bad" of life in an unequal, violent society.

The challenge of sorting out the fear of the "common bad" from the call to "common good" is a tall one. It is important to note that appeals to solidarity or to flourishing might be meaningful, but what solidarity and flourishing look like remain, at least to some extent in the eye of the beholder. In this study, those interviewed did not see themselves practicing introverted love of self, but the opposite, and many are scrupulous in their attention to the difference. They understand carrying guns as a contribution, even if how or to what remain somewhat undefined. Moreover, they understand themselves as led to contribute in this particular way in the context of a society that, in their view, has failed to protect its members. As we saw with several Black gun owners, daily life in a society where the mechanisms of peace and justice are unequal and potentially lethal for them left them little choice. Arguably, they were not rejecting the common good but were, in fact, trying to stand up for it, trying to share, (in Hollenbach's phrase), "in the goods that…life together makes possible," even in the face of persistent racism and violence. [286] Moreover, as we saw, several had come to view Black Christian non-violence as a relic of a bygone era, initially designed to appeal to white sympathy and now deployed by white Christians to perpetuate injustice and inequality. In that light, what Christians of different backgrounds can be said to share and in what ways were questions that several participants were actively asking.

The feminist theologian Suzanne DeCrane has cautioned about how conceptions of the Common Good can be misconstrued as one-size-fits-all, with a certain ideal of moral neutrality between individuals understood as serving a larger collective vision. She observes,

> in such a conception, the pursuit of the circumstances that foster the full human flourishing of the oppressed constituency is cast as the enemy of those who traditionally have enjoyed the full benefits of community. Justice for women in this construal (or for any group that has been excluded and oppressed) might indeed appear as a threat to the advantage of some men. Of course, this presumes that what has existed has been the common good, when in fact it has really been a situation that benefited certain members (the men of the community) at the

[286] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 197.

> expense of the women. This is not the common good, nor has it been authentically pursued.[287]

While she has women most immediately in view, as she further indicates, such concerns are easily extended toward and all too apt with regard to many forms of inequality and exclusion. Hollenbach's work suggests that, at least in part, the power of the common good lies in its ability to put other forms of "imagined community" in clearer perspective, challenging individual Christians to identify the ways in which they participate in society and for whom. DeCrane reminds us to ask how any particular vision of the common good may represent its own expression of "imagined community," and no less so for understanding itself as "Christian."[288] The questions of who participates in it and how must always be asked. The interviews cited in Chapter Four suggest that American Christian gun owners understand themselves to be part of any number of "imagined communities" at once, each of which has the power to shape and modify a gun owner's understanding and relationship to any and all of the others. As we have seen, their practice as gun owners is both a reflection of and a way of working out their understanding of those communities and what it means to belong. We have also seen some of the range with which they do so. Thus, hunter-farmers like Tim and Hank (who are white) participate in different communities and participate differently from one another, but also differently in other ways from Matthew or Albert (who are Black). Similarly, Bruce (white former law enforcement) does so distinctly from Wyatt (Black law enforcement). These also influence where and how they understand God in their lives and in the larger world (and vice-versa). Comfort zones and the kinds of comfort one finds available within them are ever shifting, sometimes incrementally, at other times abruptly.

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[287] Suzanne DeCrane, *Aquinas, Feminism and the Common Good*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 116.

[288] The phrase is Benedict Anderson's. See his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (New York: Verso, 1983).

Complexifying Counternarratives

DeCrane seeks to complicate and amplify our understanding of the Common Good, not dismantle it. Her questions around how we construct it, and who does that construction, recall M. Shawn Copeland's reflections on race and the Common Good, which we introduced briefly in Chapter Three (see pages 86-88). As we noted, Copeland is particularly attentive to the capacity of "common sense" to operate as a form of bias, in which it "regulates social arrangements to the immediate well-being of the dominant racial group."[289] Yet she also sees hope for a more durable Common Good in the potential solidarity in shared human creatureliness, and particularly in its capacity to remind us that "humanity is no mere aggregate of autonomous individuals. Humanity is one intelligible reality—multiple, diverse, varied and concrete, yet one."[290] Similarly, as we saw in Chapter Three (pages 88-91), Kelly Brown Douglas calls for "moral memory," "moral identity," and "moral participation," following the lead of the Black prophetic tradition, in which people come to affirm their shared humanity and destiny, and then work for communal solidarity in the hope of creating a more livable world for all. In addition to Douglas' emphasis on Black preaching and social witness, Copeland identifies the Eucharist as an enactment of a theological counter-narrative about embodiment in difference as embraced by God. These church practices (proclamation, Eucharist) push back against the self-justifying dictates of common sense and create space for new perspectives.

Along those lines, Jolyon Mitchell's work on Christian responses with media violence emphasizes the role of theological counter-narrative as a source for Christian communal discernment, with churches serving as communities that pointedly "re-frame" media depictions of violence and seek to break cycles of violence through practices rooted in their worship and their broader relational life. Building on the work of Johann Baptist Metz, and particularly on Metz's notion "dangerous memory," which remembers the liberation possible in Christ and the defeat of worldly powers, Mitchell sees a "recurring tradition of reframing violence rooted in the resurrection." This tradition "provides resources for

[289] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 14.
[290] *Ibid.*, 100.

resisting narratives which suggest that violence has the last word and is inevitable, which suggests that violence is the only legitimate and effective way of bringing order out of chaos."[291] Mitchell also makes a compelling case for the challenge and importance of that resistance, underscoring the power of news reports, images, cultural productions (such as films) to shape individual perceptions of the real and the possible, foreclosing alternatives by rendering them largely unimaginable.

Recalling Bader-Saye's caution that "our preoccupation with safety provides a temporary, though artificial, solution to our moral fragmentation," Mitchell's analysis of media violence suggests how that preoccupation unfolds in media-saturated lives and shares Bader-Saye's sense of the cost.[292] He also recognizes the significance of editorial (mis)framing in ways we might identify as social sorting in narrative and/or visual form, shaping understandings of heroism and deviance, agency and victimhood in powerful ways, including and excluding details according to its own sense of the story that needs to be told. Bearing that in mind, Mitchell's understanding of memory is largely congenial to Kelly Brown Douglas' in *Stand Your Ground*, which calls for American Christians to remember the exceptionalist myths undergirding the theo-ideology of white supremacy. After all, exceptionalist myths are, emphatically, a form of framing, and are designed to shape how spaces and people are to be encountered, understood, and narrativized—how these behaviors become "common sense," as Copeland warns. Learning to see outside them, then, is the basis of any attempt to work remedially, much less redemptively. In ways we will take up shortly, Mitchell calls for a kind of critical discipleship. As he sees it, this is more than just media studies for Christians. It means finding in the story of Jesus' death and resurrection a place of solid ground from which they can, collectively, practice wise discernment about the violence of the world and about the dispiriting consequences of how so many of the world's stories are told, thereby understanding ever more clearly God's call to them to love and serve the world as peacemakers. Mitchell writes,

> at their best…local communities of worship and memory can provide the context in which peaceable remembering, reframings and redescriptions can be nurtured. The

[291] Jolyon Mitchell, *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115.
[292] Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus*, 26.

> end result is not intended to provide psychological alleviation for troubled viewers, but rather help them confront reality in the context of the Christian story.[293]

Yet as we saw in Chapter Four, the Christian gun owners in this study were not simply receiving tradition, conceived as a set of shared church practices, norms, or sources of authority, and within which a particular counter-narrative can be identified. Tradition was neither simple nor stable but was always under negotiation in relationship to their experience. For the purposes of this study, Traci West's work serves as a reminder that participants are operating in a complex field of imperatives – a series of "shoulds" – that are both informed by and further shape their understanding of themselves as Christians, as well as of members of secular culture. Some speak very easily about their understanding of their world and how it got that way, and what they are called as individuals to do (which is usually to say, how guns fit in to the picture), by way of response. Others found this more difficult to do. As we have seen, different gun owners also understand their practice differently, even within similar demographic profiles. For example, a white male hunter may answer a question about "the world and how it got that way" quite differently than a white male personal security owner who practices concealed carry. At times, the worlds of which they speak bear little apparent relation to one another. It is also important to note that Black personal security gun owners did not always sound categorically different in purpose or worldview than white personal security gun owners.

That said, it also bears mentioning that even though many participants in this study were white and closely identified with what West calls the "dominant culture" on several levels, West's attention to embodiment remains tremendously important, precisely because the tendency to speak from a normative/universal place can prove so instinctive for white gun owners. As the previous chapters suggest, much of the discourse around Second Amendment rights seems to yearn for a vision of a society within which those norms were more secure. For example, it was clear that "common sense," a kind of unexamined process of interpretation was operating in how they read and understood Scripture, shaping what the text could and could not mean, as they saw it. Thus, their understanding of a Scriptural phrase such as "blessed are the peacemakers" was not a challenge to their

[293] Mitchell, *Media Violence*, 273.

gun practices. According to their understanding, it was by no means axiomatic to them that the call to be peacemakers entailed rejecting guns. For most participants, peacemaking – dismantling violence – *required* guns.

Moreover, several also rejected media depictions of gun violence, calling it "sensational" (Midwest Focus Group 1, 21), as well as "glamorizing decadence" (Midwest Focus Group 2, 36). They understood themselves to be working against such behaviors. For some, this seemed to be a view that was largely shared by their church communities, as indicated by those participants who were part of church security teams. Others suggested that a consensus was still under negotiation around such a practice. This suggests that any sense of a specific "counter-narrative" that reframes violence in a particular way might be elusive within a particular community, much less across different communities.

More immediately, it suggests how individually religious tradition is formed, recognized, and changed in practice. The Black gun owners in this study would likely describe themselves as deeply formed by the Black prophetic tradition, particularly in its affirmation of their humanity and dignity under pervasive white supremacy; however, for several, their sense of that dignity had led them to move away from non-violence in the Martin Luther King, Jr. tradition. For two (Anton and Matthew) this required explanation to their mothers, but not to anyone else. Many indicated their awareness of and appreciation for Black traditions of self-defense dating back to the Jim Crow era and a sense of pride in continuing that history. Similarly, several gun owners (Black and white) described religious upbringings that had always been comfortable with guns—no sense of compromise or contradiction had been present. As we saw with the hunters described in Chapter Four, for some, guns might even offer a profound sense of creatureliness and connection to creation.

It is also not entirely clear how the participants in this study were recipients or consumers of media narratives of violence. To some extent, this may reflect how deeply interiorized the framing had become. On the other hand, several Black gun owners referred to widely reported Black victims of gun violence, suggesting that media coverage continued to shape their understanding of the ubiquity of danger for Black people and thus, of the need to protect themselves. They did not discuss these cases in detail; however, it seems unlikely that they were unaware or unconcerned with how media framing of

aggressors and victims, moral desert or blamelessness, were operating. They were very familiar with media bias. For white gun owners, how media accounts might be working to construct a sense of the Other was not specifically mentioned, but this is not to say that white gun owners unanimously operated out of an uncritical sense of exceptionalism. For many, notions of place and belonging appeared to be far more complicated. At one extreme, some indicated deep disagreement with the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 and said it had called into question their relationship to gun-culture more broadly. That might be said to be some sort of acknowledgement, and disavowal, of the metanarrative of exceptionalism as described by Douglas. Others suggested that their home congregations struggled with how to balance safety and hospitality to strangers. This suggests that experience challenged the gun owners in this study to understand their faith in new ways (which we will consider in more detail shortly).

It is also important to remember that what Copeland, Douglas, and Mitchell offer as a solid place of critique against which a broken world might find its measure is also a site of negotiation in its own right. The tradition that Douglas finds so reliably anti-exceptionalist needs to be recognized for its own complexity and contingency. As we suggested in Chapter Three, Christian tradition is not clear with regard to self-defense, even though it has long pondered and protested violence. Furthermore, even if it were, that does not suggest that modern gun owners feel weighed down, much less morally constrained, by that tradition. It is neither clear that they know it, nor that it would speak to them if they did. As we noted from Astley in Chapter One,

> what matters here is what saves us, what heals us, what works for us. And therefore what we need to be saved from and for…At the very least, what we find to be salvific for us will affect what we count as central to the tradition and therefore which Psalms we don't sing, which bits of the creed we reinterpret, which words of father we take seriously. That is how Christianity changes…This selectivity constitutes one very practical way in which people exercise a critical perspective on their tradition.[294]

In this regard, it is notable that eight of the gun owners and one of the focus groups interviewed for this study made some mention of Luke 22, focusing on the words about acquiring swords spoken just prior to Jesus' departure for the Mount of Olives and his

[294] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 40-1.

arrest. They did not discuss crucifixion or resurrection. Without seeking to infer too much from what was *not* said, we might at least question the extent to which the counter-narrative of non-violence that Copeland, Douglas and Mitchell identify was present, much less significant, for many among this group of Christian gun owners. While pacifism, or at least, what John Howard Yoder has described as "chastened non-pacifism" was apparent with some, what most seemed to find in Scripture was precedent for coping with the reality of violence, even for Jesus, and indication of his love and care for his disciples in urging them to be ready for what would come, even as he knew that he would not survive.[295] By this logic, the resurrection might be understood as an affirmation of God's emphatic "no" to worldly violence, but also as a call to engagement with that violence, as they saw it, to take it seriously and to be prepared for it, even to the point of personal sacrifice. For many of them, it would not have been wrong to describe their practice as a form of taking up one's cross. The temptation to misuse weapons was precisely why a relationship with Jesus was so important for gun owners, not only for those interviewed, but in their view, for all people. It might even be argued that this was a way of engaging with "dangerous memory," rather than of rejecting it, for the story had called them to engage with dismantling violence and injustice, to work with discernment about how best to do so, and to pursue that work with empathy and humility. For some, the danger was not that guns were tools of Empire, but rather, that pacifism was.[296] As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the vision of gun owners as "pilgrims" seeking to live faithfully in the midst of a broken, violent world seemed likely to appeal to many. For them, this was not rejecting the counter-narrative of the Gospel, but of truly taking it to heart. For some, self-defense may have been a counter-narrative in its own right.

The larger point is simply that counter-narratives (like all narratives) emerge from particular contexts of their own. They are emphatically counter-narratives *for* someone and are accountable *to* someone—in principle, to God, most of all, but penultimately to someone else or even many others, in ways that might be recognized clearly, murkily, or not at all. For example, in so pointedly rejecting the counter-narrative of non-violence

[295] John Howard Yoder, *Karl Barth on the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003), 8.
[296] This was particularly evident in my interviews with Albert, Anton, Isaac, and Margot.

associated with Martin Luther King, Jr., part of what those gun owners appeared to say was that they questioned to whom it was accountable—properly to God, or politically to white allies in the Civil Rights Era? Subsequent history had caused Albert, Margot, and Crystal to ask whether it could be both, particularly when those allies fell away and indicated no sense of their own accountability in doing so, whether to God or to Black people, their erstwhile brothers and sisters. Likewise, Mimi (who is white) argued,

> I can be as good and as faithful and as law abiding and obedient as what God would ever want me to be, but that doesn't mean my neighbor is going to be…And so, as much as I pray and as much as I do it right and as much as I try, there still may come a time where somebody else makes a decision that is going to force me into a situation where I have to respond.(5)

Faithfulness directed her toward a peaceful life ("as law abiding and obedient as God would ever want me to be"), but also toward a readiness for the potential disruption of that peace. Non-violence seemed to be an expression of God's intentions, but not a pure absolute, at least as she understood it. Or, to put it differently, Mimi recognized her own accountability to God for peaceful coexistence, but also attempted to understand how she might live in a world where her neighbor might not share that same accountability or practice a similar commitment to peace. Since she also saw herself as accountable to God for the children that God has placed in her care, the counter-narrative of her faith and its many accountabilities was complex. It required resistance to the world's violence, but in more than one way. As Mimi saw it, in extreme circumstances, faith might entail a willingness to dismantle that violence in particular ways, for which she felt, as a matter of conscience, that she must be prepared to answer.

It also bears mention that if counter-narratives emerge from particular contexts, then "shadow virtues" might be seen to cut both ways. Several gun owners in this study described gun violence prevention advocates as the excessively fearful ones and saw their suspicion of guns as a form of willful ignorance and judgmentalism. As we have seen, Bader-Saye warns that "our preoccupation with safety provides a temporary, though artificial solution to our moral fragmentation."[297] For many of the gun owners in this study, this might serve as an apt description of those who are *against* guns: preoccupied with

[297] Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus*, 26.

[what gun owners would argue is an illusory] "safety," which they promote as if danger and violence might simply go away if only we all tried a bit harder to get rid of all the guns. As the gun owners seemed see it, this is very much about comfort zones. To explain this, some alluded to Col. Dave Grossman's "sheepdog paradigm," which suggests this is simply how "sheep" think.[298] As one noted, it is understandable that sheep are, instinctively, somewhat afraid of the sheepdog who is there to protect them, but no reason to do away with sheepdogs—in fact, quite the opposite.[299] For several of the Black gun owners in this study, (white) preoccupation with gun safety often appealed to a vision of the world that was already socially-sorted: it came from a social location which was less dangerous (for white people), and depended on "objective" figures of public safety like police rather than unregulated individual citizens who might prove anywhere from unreliable to extremely dangerous . Yet such a view failed to acknowledge, much less dismantle, the fears of Black people about police racism, which had convinced them that it was safer, on balance, for them to protect themselves. As they saw it, to urge them not to do so smacked of paternalism, at best. Without accountability for injustice, appeals to the common good of a safer world rang hollow. In her most recent work, Kelly Brown Douglas has noted her own shock at the silence of white Christians in the face of anti-Black violence and discrimination. She writes,

> but later, that shock was mitigated as I came to recognize the impact of a white gaze even on the vision of "good" white Christians…This results in an understanding of God's love that lends itself to virtual silence when confronted with the paradoxical issues involved in the struggle for Black lives to matter. Such an understanding compromises not only the solidarity of good white Christians with the Black community but also their moral imaginary.[300]

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[298] See Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, "On Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs," as posted at http://mwkworks.com/onsheepwolvesandsheepdogs.html. Accessed 12 November 2022. The essay is widely reprinted and was quoted in the film *American Sniper* (2014); it is often mistakenly described as an excerpt from Lt Col. David Grossman and Loren W. Christiansen, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace.* (Millstat, IL: Warrior Science Publications, 2008).

[299] This was Midwest Focus Group 1, when one participant noted, "I first encountered it [i.e., the sheepdog paradigm] as we were looking at a security team for our church, and one of the sites we were looking at was talking about sheep dogs…I thought it was interesting…that the sheep are a little frightened of the sheepdog. They kind of give them a wide berth, but if there's a wolf they all run behind you." (Midwest Focus Group 1, 9)

[300] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrecting Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 133.

Douglas wonders if the paradox of needing to defend oneself against the agents of public safety may be largely invisible to the white gaze, and even to the white *Christian* gaze, which seeks to stand on the size of God's love for all but cannot easily discern that this might require different tasks for different communities as they seek a world in which all might be one. How that paradox appears in light of events such as the January 6, 2021 Capitol riot, or more broadly, in light of modern right wing Christian extremism, is beyond the scope of this project but is an important question.[301]

Critical Discipleship and Seeing the Vulnerable Other

In Chapter One, I identified Jeff Astley's "ordinary theology" as an important resource for engaging with Christian gun owners around their practices and how they understood those practices theologically, as something they did *as Christians*. In this chapter, I have tried to reflect on the insights that Christian gun owners shared with me and to acknowledge, as Astley anticipates, that ordinary Christians orient and reorient their faith according to their own experience in significant ways. This means that when it comes to other sources of religious knowledge or authority, ordinary Christians may or may not hear, may tune in or may tune out. They draw on that knowledge selectively, as experience gives or withholds the "ring of truth" to new insights. Chapter Four offered ample illustration of this process. On one level, it is somber news, suggesting how easily one might avoid uncomfortable truths, or perhaps more accurately, take on certain discomforts but not others. If that is true, then there seems to be little prospect for a different conversation about the place of guns in American life. The alarming statistics with which we began Chapter One suggest the scope of the problem and what seems to be its overall

[301] In this study, only one white participant spoke of government tyranny as a particular matter of concern. Bob, who took part in one of the Midwest focus groups, said in a subsequent interview, "people…don't really talk about it but [owning firearms] is a deterrent to those who would like to control more because they know there are enough of us out there who will rise up, so…" [trails off]. (13) By contrast, concern about racist policing was mentioned by Albert, Margot, Crystal, Anton, Isaac, and Donna. For helpful background, see James Aho, *Far Right Fantasy: A Sociology of American Religion and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), and Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* Revised Edition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

uniqueness relative to the rest of the world. If we cannot be called to account, or drawn to reason together, perhaps there is no way to dig out of the pit this has become.

On the other hand, as we have suggested, Reader's concept of "blurred encounter" reminds us that experiences do happen that individual believers cannot simply screen out, as they step outside of their comfort zone (which must happen for most people in the course of ordinary life) Perhaps abruptly, a more constructive moment of theologizing is required. This was also apparent in Chapter Four, for example, when Matthew suggested that the January 6th riot at the US Capitol was compelling him to reflect on his politics as well as his relationship to guns. Similarly, it was apparent in Tim's recounting of the harrowing moment when as a young married man, he realized he could not take a human life, even to protect himself and his wife from armed intruders. It was also apparent in his admission that much as he loved his local church now, he would not remain a member if they voted to have an armed lay security team. Likewise, when Tina decided that she wanted to carry a gun but was nevertheless uncomfortable with carrying it late at night as an Uber driver (which was when her husband argued she most needed it), the work of reevaluation and qualification in light of new circumstances was happening. Experience was changing things as her gun practice became less hypothetical and, therefore, open to revision. In all of these circumstances, each an instance of blurred encounter, the participants were also clarifying their sense of their own faith and what it required.

Moreover, many others described distinct moments of reflexivity that had alerted them to questions that might be asked and commitments that might be reframed. As we saw in Chapter Three, Womanist perspectives are profoundly committed to naming the complex identities of women and to resisting theologies that refuse to see or which may subtly undergird the suffering of Black women, in particular—work that begins in the experiences of Black women and which evaluates and reevaluates any claims to theological truth in light of those experiences. Emmanuel Lartey's questions of practical theologians are never far away for Womanists: "*who benefits from what is done* […] who is *excluded* by the way things are done […] and who are *oppressed* by it?"[302] In this study, we have seen how such questions are operating most clearly for some Black Christian gun owners as they

[302] Lartey, "Practical Theology as a Theological Form," 131.

seek a way to live in the context of persistent and routinely lethal racism. However, we might also add that Christian gun owners, white and Black, also ponder those questions as they encounter other gun owners. At least occasionally, they ask those questions of themselves. In Chapter Two we acknowledged Brad Meltzer's important sociological study of NRA members, which noted a broad range in agreement/disagreement with NRA policy and in a personal sense of affiliation with the organization. That was borne out in the interviews conducted for this study. For example, in Midwest Focus Group 1, one participant said,

> I think overall the NRA has done a lot to help protect Second Amendment rights. I think it's been a voice – and a good voice – in most cases. I think there's some times when they've been maybe too strong a voice or times when…instead of standing up, they should've said 'Well, wait a minute, let's have some controls [on access to guns]. Let's get some balance.' (Midwest Focus Group 1, 21-22)

Many participants said they favored policies opposed by the NRA, including expanded background checks and bans on certain types of firearms. In Midwest Focus Group 2, one participant rejected the "slippery slope" argument, according to which bans on one type of firearm left the door open to bans on any and all others: "[T]hat's the NRA talking and not the average person really thinking about it." (Midwest Focus Group 2, 45). Another said, "I think the NRA has lost its way…their biggest thing is against all reason. Where, you know…'we have the right' [to guns] and [yet] they are the ones trying to convince people that the government's trying to take your guns away…Gun control is to think with common sense and reason. And they've lost their way of that." Many identified fear-mongering and opportunism at work and indicated these were not aligned with their values. What James Atwood has called "gundamentalism," a form of uncritical (perhaps even idolatrous) acceptance of the Second Amendment, was not evident in this small sample of American gun owners.[303]

That said, the purpose this study was not to prompt or engineer changes of mind or heart in the participants. It seems likely they would not have participated, much less encouraged others to do so, if they had perceived such an agenda. Who benefits from this research and who is (or could be) oppressed by it are fair questions, some of which were

[303] James Atwood, *Gundamentalism and Where It Is Taking America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Publishing, 2017).

answered most immediately for the participants by the research protocols around their anonymity and the use of their data. Yet there was also curiosity about why a white progressive pastor from the Northeast would seek out gun owners to ask such questions, in the first place, and some participants admitted that despite agreeing to an initial interview, they had not been sure they would follow through with participating, but in the end felt glad that they had. At the outset, I wondered if what I would encounter in the focus groups would be vigorous defenses of Second Amendment rights and the NRA. Though more interviews and focus groups might be conducted (and I hope they will be), such a narrow focus is not particularly what I found. Rather, I found people grounded in their own experience in complex ways, who shared a practice (with variations) which they understood as Christian, with much under negotiation in both directions. They were powerful "ordinary theologians."

Of course, it is true that I *am* a progressive pastor from the Northeast. Prior to this project, I had little first-hand knowledge of guns or exposure to "gun culture." I came to the interviews described in Chapter Four with much to learn and a desire to do so, but also with personal experience of activist NRA members in the months after the Sandy Hook shooting, counter-protesting and carrying weapons at gun violence prevention events and at "town hall" meetings with elected representatives. This had been unnerving. As I have said, what I found in speaking with gun owners was far more complex and compelling. There is more to "gun culture," and more to how the gun owners I met construct and participate in that culture, than the Second Amendment activist sub-group within the NRA had led me to believe. However, there are moments in Chapter Four (particularly in the footnotes) that also signal my own attempt to hear some of what participants in this study did *not* say, or to imagine what something they did say might look like in practice. What I heard (or did not) and what I imagined it might look like (or not) in practice inevitably reflects my own social location, which found me skeptical at times.

For example, I wondered if Mimi's seeming "humility of purpose" in carrying might be "more performative than real," given that others, (specifically,` Bruce and Bob) were so direct about their willingness to carry even in places where it was explicitly forbidden,

under the assumption that people would "thank them later" if violence broke out.[304] In addition, when Mimi expresses confidence that "if she does what she is required to do and does it 'right…then the rest will work itself out," I see an orientation toward future divine judgment that I approach differently in theological terms. I wonder how she understands what "requirements" are and where she finds them, how she experiences them as binding (and in what ways), and what she imagines it looks like when "the rest [works] itself out." What she offers as a kind of summary statement of divine mercy brings up many questions for me about how she knows these indicate God's will rather than her own social location. Thus, when I claim that "she felt her own spiritual path was clear," and then also that "God for Mimi was not known as 'a man of sorrows' who identifies with human distress, but…as the source of blessing and divine judgment," I am trying to name a constellation of theological claims implicit in her confidence, consistent with the identity she claims.[305] As a Christian who identifies with a different denomination and in different theological terms, I understand divine judgment as concerned with both individual and collective behavior, and relatedly, see sin as personal but also collective and social. Thus, to me, how things "work out" in eschatological terms seems to require something different than Mimi believes. When she worried about how circumstances might "force her into a situation where she has to respond," I felt the absence of her sense of participation in and personal accountability for those broader circumstances, which is part of what I understand it means to be Christian.[306] Of course, she emphasizes personal accountability quite emphatically, but differently than I do. I have tried to name how she (and other gun owners) understand that accountability quite carefully. It is also true that Mimi is practicing the ordinary theology that this study has hoped to uncover, with the theological values and priorities that make sense to her own faith. My questions and hesitations do not seek to underscore where she is wrong, but to emphasize how she articulates those values and priorities, particularly where I can imagine alternatives.

Similarly, in my interview with Bruce, he spoke of prayer as a very different kind of "weapon" that had grown in significance for him; however, I wondered if his earlier

[304] See page 120, especially footnote 231.
[305] See page 121.
[306] Ibid.

comments in a focus group about "light and dark" times of day being a metaphor for a "dark time" or "dark intentions" might also signal an apocalyptic strain in his thinking. I wondered how prayer as a weapon (which he described as "another way to be armed") could be reconciled with the darkness of this moment (which pointed toward the importance of being ever ready to use a firearm).[307] I took his growing awareness of prayer as an acknowledgment of moderating his self-described earlier rigidity around guns, yet I wondered how moderating it really was. For example, my own theology identifies traditional language of "principalities and powers" in less exclusively metaphysical terms than Bruce suggested, and more in ways that foreground political and economic justifications of inequality as contrary to God's vision for human flourishing. Accordingly, for me, the most relevant "dark intentions" belong to those who would seek to maintain control independent of the claims of justice, and particularly for those on the margins. In that sense, the most notable moderating influence *to me*, as such, would be an awareness of those at the margins and their claims to a more just society in which to live. As I see it, the power of prayer operates more as a call to conscience and as an expression of relationship to God – a God who cares urgently about justice. Bruce appeared to see it as a form of appeal to divine providence. My concern with such a view is that it risks simply justifying the *status quo*, leaving social change and the claims of one's neighbor for the *eschaton*. My attempts to interpret how Bruce might experience an extreme situation, and how his faith might lead him at such a moment, reflect those differences in perspective. I wonder how claims of power are shaping his understanding of how and what God "provides" in those (and other) moments, and of how he feels called to respond.

I also wondered about the ways Christian belief is shaped by claims of power when Wyatt said he taught his students to "be like Jesus with a gun."[308] As an expression of ordinary theology, the phrase named behaviors and intentions that were both important and self-evident to Wyatt. However, they were not self-evident to me and seemed to flow from a premise I was not prepared to grant easily. To me, it rests on an assumption that Jesus would have a weapon, whether a sword or a gun, and I think that opens a dangerous

[307] See page 126.
[308] See page 136.

door. Is any weapon justified, provided its purpose is defensive? Christian history is replete with examples of churches "baptizing" oppressors and oppression, and this not only distorts the Gospel as I understand it, but (in my view) remains a clear and present danger. The history of personal gun ownership in the United States shows close ties to such oppression, and while the racism is less explicit, I am not convinced much has changed, even if the historic victims of oppression now have access to guns of their own. Later, when Albert described having "summer" and "winter" guns, and routinely playing tennis with a gun on him, I was reminded of James Atwood's argument that guns represent a form of idolatry.[309] While Albert describes himself as empowered and unafraid, this seemed far from the promise of abundant life in God as I understand it. I may have scrutinized the transcripts for "idolatry" as a topic or concern as a result.

More generally, the footnotes to Chapter Four also signal occasions when I wish I had asked a follow-up question, but I hesitated to do so. That happened for different reasons, some of which were logistical (e.g., respect for participants' time). In other circumstances, I was not sure how to ask for more detail without pressing, and thereby, making the conversation directive and the participants potentially defensive. In reading the interview transcripts later, many of those moments were not as fraught as they had seemed, and I might well have proceeded with a follow up question. However, they suggest that such moments could be fraught for me, perhaps because I was inclined to disagree with something I was hearing.

Finally, what was less apparent across the interviews and focus groups as a whole were moments when the participants described encountering and reflecting upon what might be called a *vulnerable Other*. It will be obvious at this point how, for many, encounters with (some) others left them feeling profoundly vulnerable—perhaps enough to prompt their purchase of a firearm for self-defense. It will also be obvious how experience with others can translate into a broader fear of the Other, by which I mean not a specific person, but for each gun owner, a kind of person, imagined variously—but here, one who would represent a threat. As we have seen, some further indicated an awareness of and sensitivity toward the vulnerability of certain others, especially children and

[309] See pages 149-150.

spouses, whom they felt it was their duty to protect. Yet the notion that someone could pose a possible threat and yet also be vulnerable, too—that the person pointing a gun at them might have some kind of claim on them—was harder to find. This is not to say that when someone is being threatened by a racist police officer or a home intruder, it is the job of a Christian to look into their assailant's eyes and recognize their humanity. It is not that simple. However, when the gun owners in this study said versions of "God forbid I would ever have to use it, but…," they seemed to have in mind a truly "last resort" scenario, and it was difficult to tell just what, exactly, they were hoping God would forbid: their peril, or the aftermath. Either way, one cannot help but wonder how they would grapple with such an event if it were to occur and if it did, the role their faith might play. When the Other lying at one's feet appears suddenly human rather than as the manifestation of one's fears, what might happen? The great challenge is that, if guns are involved, it might well be too late.

Conclusion

The central research question of this dissertation has been "how do American Christian gun owners understand their practices theologically?". Its central thesis is that they do so in a range of ways, and that by excavating gun owners' ordinary theology, it would become clear that their practices blend faith, culture, and experience. I also argue that for American Christian gun owners, faith both shapes and is shaped by the practice of owning and carrying guns. Its original contribution to scholarship is in asking Christian gun owners to speak directly about their gun practices, their faith, the Scriptures that guide them, and how they connect them all (or do not). Accordingly, it suggests a far more complex picture of the relationship between practice and faith than the sociological or theological literatures have described. Reader's description of "blurred encounter" is helpful in its emphasis on "comfort zones" as spaces that can be conceived as theological, as well as physical and emotional. His articulation of "blurred encounter" also points to how theologies seek to function in more constructive situations when what a Christian should do becomes unclear—and consequently, a new perspective might become possible.

Key Findings

The dissertation's central findings are as follows:

1) Faith is a significant part of how Christian gun owners understand their practice, shaping why and often how they carry guns.
2) This is not a passive "application" of formal teaching they have received from typical sources of religious knowledge or authority. In this study, pastors were rarely cited by participants, although some gun owners indicated how welcome it would be to hear from religious leaders about guns and gun violence. Rather, when you ask them what they believe about guns and why, what emerges is a more constructive and individual process, within which multiple authorities and voices contend in complex ways.
3) The *Bible* plays a central role in how many Christian gun owners make sense of God's will for their lives. They read it closely. They also emphasize some stories

more than others or highlight particular words in ways that lend themselves to owning and carrying guns. The *Bible* both shapes and appears to be shaped by their behavior in subtle ways, such that some stories can be highlighted and others dismissed.

4) In deciding to own a gun, whether as a hunter and/or for their personal safety, gun owners are participating in a long history of US "gun culture," within which a "culture of armed citizenship" figures prominently. Policing boundaries and issues of access to the right to bear arms have always been a part of that history, which some gun owners acknowledge, and some do not. Black gun owners in this study expressed a strong awareness of that history. Faith commitments often help gun owners describe their understanding of and relationship to "gun culture" in its various forms.
5) Denominational statements and formal theology on gun violence or, more broadly, on self-defense have little reach in the lives and practices of gun owners. Nor do gun owners appear to have been brought into the process by which such statements are developed. Their "ordinary theologies" have different emphases (see below).
6) The Christian gun owners in this study expressed a significant sense of responsibility for those they believed God had particularly placed in their care—a responsibility which they understood as also concerning the physical safety, both of loved ones and themselves. Some went further and articulated a sense of responsibility for the safety of their neighbors, viewing carrying guns as a form of prudence.
7) Even among committed gun carriers, there is a clear sense of limits around where and how guns are carried, and in this study, participants articulated those limits by referring to aspects of their Christian faith. One participant instructed his students to "be like Jesus" with their guns, although it was not entirely clear what he intended or how that was received. Most felt strongly that guns were only to be used as a last resort, when taking a life was the only way to prevent the taking of their own lives (or the lives of those in their care). Christian faith is even more evident in how Christian gun owners describe their responsibilities rather than their rights. To my surprise, very few participants mentioned "Second Amendment rights" at all.

8) Following Walls' model of "inculturation," it is possible to describe American Christian gun owners through the categories of "indigenization" and "the Pilgrim Principle." The former is helpful in identifying a characteristic feature of the hunters and farmers interviewed, for whom guns were part of living as part of a larger creation. The latter is helpful in identifying a characteristic feature of personal safety gun owners, who view themselves as seeking to resist the violence of the world around them. Some also expressed their concerns about what Walls describes as "being subsumed" by the world and its values, which in this case is evident in those who concede that guns can also represent a dangerous temptation if one is not careful.
9) Bader-Saye's description of "shadow virtues" offers an apt description of how subsumption can operate for Christians.
10) Black gun owners have a particularly complex relationship to the white church because of the legacy of white supremacy, which historically encouraged and legitimized racist violence, and which some feel it continues to do so. In their view, the white church not only failed/fails to oppose such violence, but also may have supported/supports it, directly or indirectly.
11) Similarly, Black Christian gun owners have a complex relationship to the non-violent traditions within the Black church, especially as represented by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some described the Trump presidency in general as a resurgence of white nationalism that had spurred them to purchase guns for the first time and to reevaluate their views on non-violence; others said that "nothing had changed" for them, but that January 6th had reaffirmed their deepest concerns.
12) How notions of the "Common Good" are operating are complex. Christian gun owners seem more oriented toward the "collective good," as a sum of individual goods, than they are oriented toward a vision of the good that can only be accomplished together. This seemed visible among those gun owners who imagined that even if they disobeyed laws around carrying guns, people would "thank them later" if they were able to respond quickly to an outbreak of gun violence. Black gun owners also particularly wondered if broad appeals to the Common Good represented a form of erasure for them—particularly at the hands of white

progressives (political and ecclesiological), who wish to reject violence, in general, but do not address the connection between violence and racism, especially in institutions of public order such as police.

Limitations of this Study and Possible Directions for Future Researchers

The research phase of this project was initially designed around 6-8 in-person focus groups, to be held around the country. Recruiting participants was initially imagined as contacting area clergy and advertising locally; however, even as early as the pilot focus group, this proved completely unsuccessful. Similarly, an attempt to gather a pilot group through personal clergy contacts in a region where my denomination would be familiar and attitudes toward guns seemingly less politicized was completely unsuccessful. The same was true later in the project, when two carefully planned groups recruited with the help of local clergy and a local social service organization yielded only three or four participants, only one of whom had ever had a gun. (Those results were excluded.) It was only after I was able to make contact with people willing to vouch for me, and then clarify the scope of my questions and the nature of the project during pre-interviews with participants that they began to suggest others who might be open to speaking with me.

Then COVID arrived, meaning in-person focus groups were not possible, per University regulations. As a result, the number of persons interviewed is relatively small (24), and the number of focus groups were only five, plus the pilot group. Attempts to recruit more women, people of color, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians were not successful, and their perspectives are sorely needed for a more complete picture of American Christian gun owners to emerge. I reached out to representatives of the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA) without success. Similarly, the challenges in recruiting LGBT+ Christian gun owners are also significant. I attempted to contact the Pink Pistols in the hope of getting their help; however, they did not respond. I continue to feel that all of those perspectives and the stories behind them are deeply needed.

The ways in which being online affected the conversation of several groups was difficult to assess, although it was clear that, at times, participants could not hear one another's responses, or that technological glitches meant that someone stopped talking.

The "flow" of conversation was very different and more formal. How trust and rapport develop (or do not) in an online group of strangers is difficult to determine. How researchers should read body language is also difficult to determine.

It is also true that the temporary suspension of research with live subjects (as the University's online protocols were being crafted during the first months of the pandemic) meant that I pressed ahead with theological background prior to most of my interviews and groups, rather than after all of them had been completed. That may have introduced a degree of confirmation bias in my questions or responses, although I did not consciously allude to that background in what I asked. Also along those lines, I recognize that while my interview questions did evolve over the research period, the direction of that evolution was to ask more general questions rather than more specific ones, so that participants would have more scope to answer them in their own ways. However, at times, when someone would say they did not understand the question and I had to rephrase it, I may have shifted the dynamic and foreclosed some of the musing and formulating that I wanted to invite.

I do very much hope that guns and gun violence will continue to engage practical theologians. Although the challenges of establishing trust remain, so does the potential for insightful work along any number of lines. For example, a theological-action-research (TAR) approach to a particular congregation as it ponders establishing a church security team made up of lay members, or as it grapples with how to balance access and hospitality with safety (and who decides), would be excellent contributions. In the US context, there would be great use for studies of how theology informs practices to empower and engage women, particularly around self-protection, and in how police officers seek to live and understand themselves as Christians. Comparative international studies that explore similarities and differences between US Christians and South African or Latin American Christians are greatly needed. In Chapter Five, we alluded to formal theological work that sees the Eucharist, in particular, as constitutive of the Church as the Body of Christ in ways alternative to the racism and violence of the world. It would be fascinating to explore how liturgical Christians, especially Roman Catholics, negotiate being "constituted" in that way with life in the world (if they understand themselves to be so constituted at all). In the overlap between practical theology and public theology, how churches seek to participate in broader conversations about guns and gun violence, and how "witness" operates in ways

that might include gun owners (many of whom are Christians, after all) would be helpful. And much more work could be done on how Christians grapple theologically with fear in any number of forms, some of which prompt some of them to carry firearms.

Implications

I have indicated that I am not a gun owner. I have been able to live largely without fear of gun violence for most of my life. Accordingly, I came to this subject very much as an outsider and with redemptive hope for Christian witness as part of what might foster change. In meeting and listening to American Christian gun owners, I have come to see that hope with a great deal more nuance and a certain amount of qualification, given where the conversation as I observe it currently sits. However, my own hopes remain liberative. Critical discipleship challenges Christians to ask questions of their own comfort zones and to notice who is "in" and who is "out" and how such decisions are made, with a particular commitment to engaging the experiences of those on the margins. In a world that is largely safe for me, personally, coming to recognize where the margins are, and the many forms that marginality can take, has been challenging. I have tried to hear that and to learn from it.

I believe that denominations and churches can also learn from it. There is a certain amount of "gatekeeping" that goes on in how collective assemblies of Christians do the work of social witness. Who speaks and for how long, what votes are taken and who does the voting, what is prepared in advance and what gets hashed out on the floor are all sites where choices must be made and the perspectives of those doing the choosing are brought to bear. As we have seen, the results may be profoundly thoughtful in some ways. However, in the case of guns, they do not seem to speak to, much less for gun owners. I would argue for a more open, practical theology approach that engages more people in the process and aspires to a deeper reflexivity as it proceeds. An ongoing commitment to listening well will offer its own insights into what might then be spoken. Put another way, Christian institutions should look to embrace their own forms of "blurred encounter," where they take on the challenge of thinking theologically outside their comfort zones, whether those be procedural/structural, theological, or sociological.

For the more procedurally-facing world of academic Practical Theology, I would say that Thomas Groome's model of *shared praxis* remains a powerful tool for engaging Christians in deep reflection on the practices by which they engage church and world. However, I would qualify some of Groome's inclination to see the Divine as an unchanging core with many expressions. This seems to preserve a distinction between theory and *praxis*, with *praxis* as an "embodiment" of larger ideas. But the process of *shared praxis* seems (to me, at least) to be more generative. A more constructivist approach that attends to how theologies are made and enacted, rather than focusing on and eagerly pushing for the connection of those theologies to a supposedly objective truth (defined how?), seems more useful to me.

I would also argue for close attendance to Jeff Astley's "ordinary theology," as a way to engage the profoundly personal and often deeply held ways in which believers frame and reframe, revise and reimagine the ways in which they experience a sense of connection to God. Such active work was evident in the interviews conducted as part of this research. How participants read Scripture, such as Luke 22, showed how some emphasized particular parts. Furthermore, they seemed to place ellipses before other verses that did not reflect what Jesus as they understood him would have preached. For many Black gun owners, this was also a critical and deliberate project of undoing the harm (as they saw it) of misreading the pacifism of Jesus in ways that had come to undermine Black flourishing. This complexifies our understanding of gun ownership as a form of Christian practice. However, it also reminds us of the tremendous richness of attending to practices, in general, and of trying to connect with them by closely attending to how individual believers enact and understand them. I also hope I have contributed to the case for broadening our attention to where Christian practices occur—that people see themselves as doing Christian things or acting in Christian ways well beyond the walls of church. That they are out there, doing the best they can, drawing on a usable faith that sometimes meets their needs and sometimes does not, with experience a constant teacher, was clear from my conversations, immensely moving, and I believe quite important for practical theologians to keep in view. Our work can only benefit from the deeper watching and listening this demands.

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Appendix

Research Permissions and Amendments from the University

University of St Andrews | FOUNDED 1413

University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee

08 January 2019

Dear Max Grant

Thank you for submitting your ethical application which was considered at the School of Divinity Ethics Committee meeting on 19 December 2018 when the following documents were reviewed:

1. Ethical Application Form
2. Participant Information Sheet
3. Consent Form
4. Debriefing Form

The School of Divinity Ethics Committee has been delegated to act on behalf of the University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC) and has granted this application ethical approval. The particulars relating to the approved project are as follows -

Approval Code:	DI14014	**Approved on:**	19/12/2018	**Approval Expiry:**	18/12/2023
Project Title:	Guns and the American Christian: A Practical Theological Study				
Researcher(s):	Richard Maxwell Grant				
Supervisor(s):	Dr Eric Stoddart				

Approval is awarded for five years. Projects which have not commenced within two years of approval must be re-submitted for review by your School Ethics Committee. If you are unable to complete your research within the five year approval period, you are required to write to your School Ethics Committee Convener to request a discretionary extension of no greater than 6 months or to re-apply if directed to do so, and you should inform your School Ethics Committee when your project reaches completion.

If you make any changes to the project outlined in your approved ethical application form, you should inform your supervisor and seek advice on the ethical implications of those changes from the School Ethics Convener who may advise you to complete and submit an ethical amendment form for review.

Any adverse incident which occurs during the course of conducting your research must be reported immediately to the School Ethics Committee who will advise you on the appropriate action to be taken.

Approval is given on the understanding that you conduct your research as outlined in your application and in compliance with UTREC Guidelines and Policies (http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/guidelinespolicies/). You are also advised to ensure that you procure and handle your research data within the provisions of the Data Provision Act 1998 and in accordance with any conditions of funding incumbent upon you.

Yours sincerely

Convener of the School Ethics Committee

cc Supervisor

School of Divinity Ethics Committee
St Mary's College
University of St Andrews
St Andrews
Fife KY16 9JU

School of Divinity Ethics Committee

27 September 2020

Dear Revd Grant

Thank you for submitting your amendment application which comprised the following documents:

1. Amendment Application
2. Amended Coded Data Consent Form
3. Amended Participant Information Sheet
4. Amended Sample Advertisement

The School of Divinity Ethics Committee has approved this ethical amendment application and the particulars of this approval are as follows –

Original Approval Code:	DI14014	**Approved on:**	19 December 2018
Amendment Approval Date:	21 September 2020	**Approval Expiry Date:**	18 December 2023
Project Title:	Guns and the American Christian: A Practical Theological Study		
Researcher(s):	Revd Richard Maxell Grant	**Supervisor:**	Dr Eric Stoddart
School/Unit:	School of Divinity		

Ethical amendment approval does not extend the originally granted approval period of five years, rather it validates the changes you have made to the originally approved ethical application. If you are unable to complete your research within the original five-year validation period, you are required to write to the School Ethics Committee to request a discretionary extension of no greater than 6 months or to re-apply if directed to do so, and you should inform the School Ethics Committee when your project reaches completion.

Any serious adverse events or significant change which occurs in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration, must be reported immediately to the School Ethics Committee, and an Ethical Amendment Form submitted where appropriate.

Approval is given on the understanding that you adhere to the Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice (http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/guidelinespolicies/).

Yours sincerely,

Rev Dr Stephen Holmes
Principal of St Mary's College
Head of School

Cc Dr Eric Stoddart

School of Divinity Ethics Committee
Convenor: Dr Eric Stoddart
T: 01334 462841] E: divinitypg@st-andrews.ac.uk

University of St Andrews | FOUNDED 1413

School of Divinity Ethics Committee

14 December 2022

Dear Rev Grant

Thank you for submitting your amendment application which comprised the following documents:

1. Ethical Amendment Application
2. Participant Information Sheet

The School of Divinity Ethics Committee has approved this ethical amendment application and the particulars of this approval are as follows –

Original Approval Code:	DI1404	**Approved on:**	19 December 2018
Amendment Approval Date:	1 June 2022	**Approval Expiry Date:**	18 December 2023
Project Title:	Guns and the American Christian: A Practical Theological Study		
Researcher(s):	Rev Richard Maxwell Grant	**Supervisor:**	Dr Eric Stoddart
School/Unit:	School of Divinity		

Ethical amendment approval does not extend the originally granted approval period of five years, rather it validates the changes you have made to the originally approved ethical application. If you are unable to complete your research within the original five-year validation period, you are required to write to the School Ethics Committee to request a discretionary extension of no greater than 6 months or to re-apply if directed to do so, and you should inform the School Ethics Committee when your project reaches completion.

Any serious adverse events or significant change which occurs in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration, must be reported immediately to the School Ethics Committee, and an Ethical Amendment Form submitted where appropriate.

Approval is given on the understanding that you adhere to the Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice (http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/guidelinespolicies/).

Yours sincerely,

Prof Sabine Hyland
Convenor of School of Divinity Ethics Committee

cc Dr Eric Stoddart, Supervisor

School of Divinity Ethics Committee
Convenor: Prof Sabine Hyland
T: 01334 462628 E: divinitypg@st-andrews.ac.uk