

GOD
AND GUNS

*The Bible against
American Gun Culture*

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FOREWORD

Stanley Hauerwas

I gave away the gun my father made for me. It was a beautiful weapon. He carved the stock out of a hickory tree he had cut down himself. At the time I was a student at Yale Divinity School. I had come home to Texas for a brief summer visit. The first thing my father did—my father the bricklayer—was to put the gun he made in my hands. My first words were “Thank you. But you realize someday we are going to have to take these goddamn things away from you people.”

I focus on this exchange between my father and me in a chapter of my book *A Community of Character*. In the chapter, I suggest that even though my response might be right given the place of gun ownership in American society, my response to my father was despicable. I was clearly a self-righteous little . . . (I leave it to the reader to supply the appropriate descriptor). I had been away for two years. I suspect my father sensed that I was becoming part of a different world than the one I had been raised in. His gift of the gun was a gesture of love. I was too stupid to get it. I begin with this story of my father and the gun because I think it embodies the tension with which the authors of this book struggle.

There is, of course, as the chapters in this book make clear, a tension between texts in the Bible that seem

to suggest that Christians are not always to refrain from violent means, though nonviolence seems to be the norm. Some may counter by pointing out there is nothing about guns in the Bible; but only a literalist would draw from that absence that the Bible might have nothing to say about guns. Any honest reading of the Bible must acknowledge there are texts, as these chapters suggest, that seem to justify the use of violence in a righteous cause. Yet there are also texts that seem to suggest that the people of God are never to use violent means to sustain even their lives. Both positions are there, and they cannot be reconciled.

However, the tension I have in mind—the tension also present in my father’s giving me the gun—is the tension created by the centuries of the presumption that Christians have no problem with the use of weapons to achieve what is regarded as theirs. It had never occurred to my father that there might be a problem in owning a gun. And my father was a wonderfully kind and good man. That is the reality that the writers of these chapters face. They must challenge what has been and continues to be taken for granted by good people. Moreover, that which is taken for granted has shaped readings of Scripture that they must also challenge. No easy task.

The task is complicated because often the ownership of guns is not on anyone’s agenda. For example, as one committed to Christian nonviolence, I am seldom asked about gun ownership. It is assumed that war is the main issue. But to own a gun is to rob ourselves of the necessities that force imaginative alternatives to violence. Of course, not having a gun may be dangerous but then so is having a gun.

I am happy to report that the chapters in this book offer the kind of imaginative readings that help us see what alternative readings of texts entail. In particular the authors

challenge the familiar readings of texts that have been assumed to justify violence and the possession of weapons. They do so, moreover, by avoiding the gross characterization of the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible as violent in contrast to the nonviolence of the New Testament. As a result, these chapters not only commend nonviolence: they are themselves nonviolent.

That this book avoids that contrast between the two testaments makes this book important for questions about the ownership of guns by Christians. This book exemplifies the kind of work we will increasingly need to do and to understand if Christians are to learn how to live in a world in which they are no longer in control. That Christians assume they should have a gun in their possession is, as these writers show, a profound mistake given the witness of Scripture. This book alone will not change that behavior, but it is a start. Thank God for it.

GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA: A THEOLOGICAL TREATMENT FOR A DEADLY EPIDEMIC

Christopher B. Hays

We are in the midst of a deadly epidemic. It has swept through countless public places, affecting all of us and killing thousands. In individual outbreaks related to gatherings for school or a concert, dozens have wound up dead.

We are speaking, of course, of gun violence, which killed almost 40,000 Americans in 2017, the most recent year for which there is complete data, and wounded about 100,000 more. These numbers are rising. Guns now cause more deaths in the United States than auto accidents.

The contrast between the public reaction to the coronavirus pandemic and the public reaction to the gun-violence epidemic has been as striking as it is perplexing. Americans have proven willing to make enormous sacrifices to help their governments and medical systems get control of an outbreak of disease—they have shut down the economy, canceled almost half a year of school, and given up all sorts of personal freedoms and enjoyments to which they are accustomed. Many take the threat so seriously that they will not leave their homes.

The sacrifices that would be necessary to curb gun violence would not be remotely as costly as those that have been introduced in an attempt to curb the coronavirus

pandemic. Arguably, these sacrifices would even increase our sense of personal freedom, granting us greater domestic safety and security. Yet measures to keep us safe from guns get scarcely any political traction at the national level.



The notion that we could fix this problem is not hypothetical. Unlike the coronavirus pandemic, gun violence is a localized epidemic. Other developed nations have been relatively untouched by gun violence in recent years. It may be true that the United States, founded and forged in bloody wars and settled at gunpoint, has a “special relationship” with the gun.¹ As the figures in “By the Numbers” reflect, few Americans grow up outside the shadow of firearms. That was true for me too. My own grandfather, a veteran of the Korean War and sometime cattle rancher in Oklahoma, kept an assortment of shotguns and rifles in a glass case in his living room. And I found myself to have a relatively steady hand while skeet shooting with the Boy Scouts. These are only a couple of the countless stories Americans can tell.

From a different angle: The gun is a potent symbol, and the United States has claimed gun violence as part of its heritage in a way that other nations do not. Stanley Hauerwas has argued cogently that “war has a role in the American story that is quite unique. . . . [it] is the glue that gives Americans a common story.”² Is it unrelated that guns are a domestic problem unique to America among developed nations?

The United States’ gun problem is also related to one of its other distinctives: its enduring religiosity. Visiting from

1. *Lapham’s Quarterly Magazine Special Issue: A History of Gun Violence* (January 2018).

2. Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), xvi.

France between the second and third Great Awakenings, Alexis de Tocqueville commented that “there is no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”³ Christianity in America may now be declining, but this basic observation was certainly true, compared to other developed nations, through the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, de Tocqueville also observed that “Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other.”⁴ This is still true of the “Christian Right.” And, although de Tocqueville had some positive things to say about Christianity, it is not clear that he meant this observation to be complimentary. After all, one of his first and broadest comments about Christianity was this: “The Christian nations of our age seem to me to present a most alarming spectacle; the impulse which is bearing them along is so strong that it cannot be stopped, but it is not yet so rapid that it cannot be guided: their fate is in their hands; yet a little while and it may be so no longer.”⁵

If the spectacle of American Christianity in the 1830s was alarming, it is surely more so now. The inability of certain American Christians to distinguish American freedoms from Christianity has become dangerous—to the point of death. Hauerwas has diagnosed the problem nicely: “Americans continue to maintain a stubborn belief in God, but the God they believe in turns out to be the American god.”⁶ We are honored that Hauerwas wrote the

3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1.17. Full text available at www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm.

4. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1.17.

5. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, “Introduction.”

6. Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, 16.

foreword for this volume, and we hope that it contributes to his project of reminding us that God is bigger than our countries and ourselves.

The problem—which plagues U.S. debates on gun violence as well as on other matters of social well-being such as mask-wearing in a pandemic⁷—is that “American liberty” has for so long been defined in terms of “rugged individualism.” Ultimately this devolves into “every man for himself,” rather than a vision of the common good. Concurrent with the shrinking of actual Christianity, the United States has seen a rise in “Christian nationalism,” a bastard stepchild that does not require people to think about their neighbors as human beings, or to consider the neighbors’ health and flourishing, unless they conform to the “right” identity: white, Christian, straight, etc.

It is this Christian nationalism that ultimately underlies much of the U.S. gun problem. Crucially, however, Christian nationalism is less a *function* of participation in Christian communities than an *alternative* to it. Guns are part of that religion. Recent social-scientific research confirms this usurpation of God by guns among Christian nationalists. Mencken and Froese have observed that, “once embraced as a source of identity and power, the gun can become an object of worship which makes its own demands, no longer simply a tool used for emotional solace but rather a source of sacred meaning.”⁸ Physical actions like repeatedly loading, reloading, and cleaning a gun become ritualistic affirmations

7. “Christian nationalism” is in fact also a primary risk factor for unsafe behaviors related to the spread of COVID: Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs, “Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans’ Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (July 26, 2020); <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12677>. On the difference between Christian nationalism and Christianity, see below.

8. F. Carson Mencken and Paul Froese, “Gun Culture in Action,” *Social Problems* 66 (2019): 7.

of membership in the cult of gun ownership, much like moving one's fingers along the beads of a rosary is a physical manifestation and affirmation of Catholic faith.⁹ Such rituals reorganize participants' lives, both outwardly and inwardly, around a cult of the gun.¹⁰

It is thus no surprise that genuine "religious symbols and rituals may supplant the emotional and moral need for guns."¹¹ *Actual religious involvement has a negative effect on the correlation between conservative evangelical Protestantism and gun ownership*: those who attend church regularly and are engaged in their church communities are less likely to identify gun ownership as a significant element of their identity. President Obama's comment that a certain subset of rural Americans "cling to guns *or* religion" was accurate: God and guns are *mutually exclusive* organizing principles.¹²

My own activism has given me a small taste of guns' religious significance. A few years ago, I organized Fuller faculty to build and publicize some webpages with resources on gun violence. The project touched a nerve, drawing public attention. I had people calling my office to object; some administrators within Fuller started keeping uneasy tabs on the project, lest we claim that we represented an official seminary position. Later, when we planned the conference that gave rise to this book, the anxiety around security concerns was unlike anything in my professional experience. It was the closest I've come to the experience of cartoonists who make fun of the prophet Muhammad; it was clear that we were

9. Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 101.

10. Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 279.

11. Mencken and Froese, "Gun Culture," 7.

12. Mencken and Froese, "Gun Culture," 21.

treading on people's holy ground. I might have thought that my work on the Bible itself would have ruffled some feathers over the years, but nothing I have said or written elsewhere has produced this kind of reaction. Clearly, the Bible is nowhere near as sacred to some people as guns are.

The grim sequence of shooting after shooting continues in U.S. news. There are the same outcries, the same calls for “thoughts and prayers.” Arguably, the primary problem is that we simply have incredibly lax gun laws—it takes little time and little effort in most states to get one's hands on an arsenal of weaponry designed not for hunting or target practice but for war. Military-grade guns, along with firearms of every other stripe, are easier to find in some places than fresh vegetables. But the reason we have such incredibly lax gun laws is that even those who recognize the problem have proven politically incapable of doing anything about it. Even in the immediate wake of mass shootings, politicians take to Twitter to rile up their base, declaring that the “God-given right to bear arms” must not be infringed.¹³

Ultimately, then, the issue is cultural inertia—including (or especially) on the part of many religious groups. Many Christians wonder what their faith tradition has to say about this peculiarly American crisis. I have talked to numerous pastors who refuse to participate in community action aimed at changing gun laws, claiming that it's just too heated and divisive an issue. But a problem with such a significant religious component needs religious solutions as well as political ones. This volume is a start in that

13. E.g., <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/04/yes-gun-ownership-is-a-god-given-right-228034>.

direction, asking what the Bible has to say about gun violence in the hope of spurring our national conscience into action.

Thankfully, we're not alone in this project. James E. Atwood, author of *America and Its Guns: A Theological Exposé* and *Gundamentalism and Where It Is Taking America*, has been a pioneering voice in the conversation. Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, in *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence*, offer pastoral perspectives on the problem. There are also academic studies that investigate America's particular preoccupation with guns.¹⁴

But there is a need for *this* book. In the early days of its development, we checked out the competition, searching Amazon for variations on “guns and the Bible.” Incredibly, we found nothing like this book. Then we tried googling “guns and the Bible”—and came up with a lot of poorly argued blog posts and other similar material. Even more shocking was that almost everything we found was from a progun perspective. Again and again, we found these authors at least nominally connecting their ideology of gun rights to religious beliefs grounded in the Bible. As biblical scholars, we knew it was time to speak.

In 2019, a group of scholars, students, religious leaders, and concerned church-goers gathered at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, to talk about the distinctively American crisis of gun violence. What does the Bible have to say about the use of violence, and how might that connect to the use of guns specifically? What would it mean for Christian faith

14. E.g., Adam Winkler, *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America* (New York: Norton & Co., 2013); Thomas Gabor, *Confronting Gun Violence in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Lauren Langman and George Lundskow, *God, Guns, Gold and Glory: American Character and Its Discontents* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

and activism if we took the Bible seriously on this issue? The scholars whose work is gathered here are people who have spent their entire professional lives studying the Bible, thinking about the sort of ethics and politics it ought to inspire. We discovered that we shared a common vision. It became very clear that we see the Bible's contribution to the conversation about guns very differently than the authors of those blog posts.

The following chapters represent the results of these conversations. Each pays attention to both the ancient and the modern contexts of the Bible, using the one to inform the other. They bring in breaking headlines, pop culture, psychology, and survey data, as well as cutting-edge research on the ancient cultures in which the biblical texts were first formed—first to understand the Bible, then to follow where it leads when it comes to the gun violence that surrounds us.

In “Scripture, Guns, and Psychology,” Brent Strawn focuses on the book of Joshua, which is notorious for its depiction of the conquest of Canaan and accompanying strong “anti-Canaanite” sentiment. Though people sometimes justify violence by appealing to this and other biblical depictions of violence, Strawn suggests that the Bible is no more violent than our own blood-saturated society. Recognizing that we’re projecting ourselves onto the Bible, he argues, is the first step toward limiting our own violent proclivities.

Yolanda Norton connects the public lamentation of Saul’s wife Rizpah to the public protests of Black women in “A Mother’s Lament.” Like Rizpah, Black mothers have cause to lament the murder of their sons, who have been sacrificed as perceived threats to the social order in repeated acts of state-sanctioned violence. Like Rizpah,

Black mothers have been thrust to the forefront in the battle for accountability; like her, their actions are a reminder of the importance of public witness in establishing the moral value of marginalized lives.

In “Do Not Be Afraid,” Christopher B. Hays asks how the prophet Isaiah would respond to gun owners’ desires for self-protection. He argues that, even in a context of existential national threat, Isaiah eschews violence—even when it seems to be the most practical option. This “impractical” response to danger is part of a prophetic message that emphasizes social justice, the futility of human power, and the importance of reliance on God. The chapter closes with a reflection on a French monk who prophesied his own murder but forgave his murderer in advance, as an example of nonviolent imitation of Christ.

In “Israelite Bows and American Guns,” T. M. Lemos compares the symbolism of the bow in ancient Israel with the symbolism of the gun in contemporary America. Though separated by two and a half millennia, both the bow and the gun tie together violence, physical dominance, and hypermasculinity. Guns, like the bow, are the purview of dominant males and deployed against dehumanized enemies. This dehumanizing violence is powerfully critiqued from within the Bible, reaching its climax in the Gospels’ image of a crucified, emasculated Jesus.

In “This Sword Is Double-Edged,” Shelly Matthews examines three key passages from the New Testament that have been used to justify unregulated gun ownership. Rather than arguing that the true meaning of these passages is either pacifistic or militaristic, Matthews argues for the importance of an interpretive stance that recognizes within Scripture both oppressive and violent texts as well as liberating and pacifist texts. Rather than an anything-goes approach to

interpretation, however, Matthews identifies the communal pursuit of justice and love as the crucial standard by which the saving potential of such texts should be evaluated.

Finally, David Lincicum plainly asks, “Can a Christian Own a Gun?” Though the New Testament does not directly mention guns, it contains a number of resources that help us think about the role that individual Christians should play in our broken, violent world. In that light, Lincicum argues that the gun is a temptation to arrogate life-destroying power to the wielder, which should be resisted by those who follow a crucified Messiah. Guns give us the power to kill instantaneously, and the New Testament does not countenance our seizure of such power—even in self-defense. We are called instead to be a *signum amoris*, a sign of love, in a world plagued by armed violence.



Although the arguments made in this volume are bold, our expectations are relatively modest. After all, if presidents and movie stars have failed to make a difference, what hope do a few professors have?

In the end, we hope our witness will inspire others within the church simply to recognize and state clearly, to whomever will listen, that any Christianity that supports guns as a solution to social problems is not Christianity at all. As Hauerwas wrote, “The church does not so much have a plan or policy to make war less horrible or to end war. Rather, the church is the alternative to the sacrifice of war in a war-weary world. The church is the end of war.”¹⁵ We testify that the church is also an alternative to gun

15. Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, 68.

violence, and thus a way toward an end to gun violence. We are inspired by an example like Dorothy Day:

[S]he practiced a form of prophecy: she spoke against the atom bomb on principle and refused to cooperate with the civil defense drills of the 1950s, drills designed to inure the public to the use of nuclear weapons. Despite its blinding moral truth, the case against atomic and nuclear weapons has never had any political bite, so the efforts were without political impact; they were a form of Christian witness for its own sake.¹⁶

As Americans we find ourselves in a historical moment when even small schoolchildren are being drilled in active-shooter response drills, teaching them that the terror of mass shootings in elementary schools is more normal than laws to prevent them. It seems blindingly clear that an alternative is necessary. We stand as witnesses to the alternative.

16. Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 176.