

The Christian Handgun Owner and Just War

Michael R. Grigoni

SOCIOLOGISTS HAVE ESTABLISHED AN INTRICATE LINK between gun ownership and specific forms of Christianity, notably evangelical Protestantism, in US American life.¹ This finding prompts the question: Why do the followers of a crucified savior feel it necessary to have a gun in their lives? To explore this question, I undertook ethnographic fieldwork with evangelical Christian handgun owners in central North Carolina from 2017 to 2019.² I sought to develop a Christian ethical analysis of this issue that might be received by Christian handgun owners, making it imperative that I attend to the lived experience of such individuals. Ethnography enabled me to do so, facilitating engagement with a way of being in the world that I found “strange,” yet which might, over time, become “familiar”—or at the very least, less strange.³

¹ See, for example, Stephen M. Merino, “God and Guns: Examining Religious Influences on Gun Control Attitudes in the United States,” *Religions* 9, no. 6 (2018): 189; David Yamane, “Awash in a Sea of Faith and Firearms: Rediscovering the Connection between Religion and Gun Ownership in America,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 3 (2016): 622–636. These studies correlate “white evangelical Protestants” (Merino) and “evangelical Protestant affiliation” (Yamane) with higher rates of gun ownership compared to other religious groups. See also Abigail Vegter and Kevin den Dulk, “Clinging to Guns and Religion? A Research Note Testing the Role of Protestantism in Shaping Gun Identity in the United States,” *Politics and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2021): 809–824.

² During my fieldwork, I engaged in participant-observation and conducted qualitative interviews with twenty-five male Christian handgun owners, the majority of whom identify as white evangelical Protestants. In addition to my research in central North Carolina, I conducted site visits and qualitative interviews at two churches that employ armed church security in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Dallas, Texas. I also attended the 2018 NRA Annual Meeting, held in Dallas that year. Duke University Campus IRB Protocol ID: 2018-0037 (E0361).

³ I locate my use of ethnography within a broader turn by Christian theologians and ethicists who employ the method to ground theological reflection in concrete contexts and everyday life. On this turn, see Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011); Todd Whitmore, “Crossing the Road: The Case for Ethnographic Fieldwork in Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2007): 273–294. The language of “strange” and “familiar” derives from the adage that anthropological

While attending a church security workshop at the outset of my research, I met Bill, a white Christian handgun owner and concealed carry instructor who provides armed security at his church on Sunday mornings. During our conversation, he told me he teaches concealed carry “from a Christian perspective” and invited me to take the course. Doing so, I thought, would help me shift from “learning about” to “learning from” an interlocutor—to begin to “know from the inside.”⁴ A few months later I took the course, journeying deeper into the form of life I sought to understand.

The course did not disappoint. For nearly ten hours one gloomy, wintry Saturday, Bill taught concealed carry in his living room to me and three other students. Framed by Bill’s “Christian perspective,” the course went beyond the requirements of North Carolina state law, describing how Christian identity and commitment should frame and limit the use of deadly force. This paper opens with a description of Bill’s course and then turns to the just war tradition to illuminate what I encountered in Bill and other Christian handgun owners in my fieldwork. I argue that just war can assist Christian ethical reflection on guns as it moves from a descriptive to a normative register, while also helping to make sense of the lived experience of interlocutors like Bill. I then turn to the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an African American self-defense group founded in the mid-1960s that viewed firearms as integral to the advancement of civil rights. I use the Deacons for Defense as a contrastive case study to indicate the limits of just war for closing the gap between description and norm. This paper considers these cases together to advance Christian ethical reflection on guns in a manner that centers and speaks to the lived experience of actual handgun owners while also showing the benefits and limits of using an established Christian ethical paradigm (that is, just war) for doing so. It closes by indicating directions for future research.

A COURSE IN CHRISTIAN CONCEALED CARRY

Seated beneath a wall mounted flat-screen TV, Bill began his concealed carry course by directing our attention to 1 Corinthians 6:12 on a PowerPoint slide: “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.” Bill asked us to think about the first clause of the verse: “You may find yourself in a situation where the use of

inquiry renders the strange familiar and the familiar strange. See Matthew Engelke, *How to Think like an Anthropologist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.

⁴ Tim Ingold, “Knowing from the Inside,” in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–15.

lethal force is lawful, but it may not be expedient for you to do so.” He then turned to the second clause: “When carrying a concealed firearm, you must not be brought under the power of the bad guy. You cannot allow yourself to be provoked.” A new slide appeared, which Bill identified as the course theme: “Your first priority is to not shoot. If you have to shoot, you shoot to stop, not to kill.”

We then turned to North Carolina state law, reading portions selected by Bill in preparation for the test that would follow. Most of our time was spent on Article 14 of the North Carolina General Statutes which addresses the use of defensive force: “A person is justified in the use of deadly force and does not have a duty to retreat in any place he or she has the lawful right to be if ... he or she reasonably believes that such force is necessary to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm to himself or herself or another.”⁵ Here Bill tutored us in North Carolina’s version of Stand Your Ground, legislation present in some form or another in more than half of states. An extension of the logic of the Castle Doctrine, Stand Your Ground expands the justifiable use of deadly force from private to public space—from one’s home to “any place you have the lawful right to be.”⁶ Prior to 2011, North Carolina state law required citizens to retreat if faced with an attack outside of their home; they are no longer required to do so.

As we read and discussed this statute, Bill offered commentary redirecting us to the course theme. “Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that you’re supposed to protect everyone,” he would say. Or, “Stay out of it if you don’t know the full picture,” or, “Just because you can doesn’t mean you should”—all the while rehearsing 1 Corinthians 6:12 to remind us not to confuse “lawfulness” with “expediency.” He used the scriptural metaphor of wheat and chaff to distinguish between those who pursue a concealed carry license for “the right reasons” from those “legally seeking a thrill.” His commentary served as a kind of midrash on North Carolina state law, instructing us that shooting to kill should always be a last resort for Christians.

Bill then led us in discussing a series of scenarios involving the use of deadly force drawn from various online news sources. An article headline and body text would flash onto the TV screen and Bill would read the news report in full, pausing to emphasize features such as

⁵ North Carolina General Statutes, § 14–51.3.

⁶ North Carolina General Statutes, § 14–51.3. The Castle Doctrine, rooted in common law, is a legal principle that allows individuals to use force, including deadly force, to defend their home or “castle” from unlawful intrusion, without a duty to retreat. For a discussion of the Castle Doctrine with reference to North Carolina, see Lawrence D. Graham, Jr., “Protecting the Home: Castle Doctrine in North Carolina,” *Campbell Law Review* 43, no. 1 (2021): 137–154.

location, time of day, whether innocent bystanders were present, and the moments leading up to the use of deadly force by the intervening shooter. The articles presented a variety of scenarios: “Off Duty Cop Shoots Mall Attacker”; “Church Worker Uses Concealed Handgun to Stop Would-Be Robber”; “Man with AK-47 Targets Texas Waffle House. When Police Arrive, They Find Him Shot in Parking Lot.” After each, Bill had us imagine ourselves as the intervening shooter, the supposed “good guy with a gun,” asking not only whether we would be justified in shooting according to North Carolina state law, but whether we would be justified according to his principles for Christian concealed carry. The discussion became an exercise in phronesis in light of what we had learned. In most cases, the intervening shooter was not justified in taking the shot according to Bill’s principles for Christian concealed carry, even if they were justified by law in doing so.

“What about Stephen Willeford?” I asked him. Just months before, Willeford had intervened with his AR-15 at the 2017 Sutherland Springs church shooting.⁷ I was sufficiently familiar with Willeford’s story to know that he likely stood as a moral exemplar for Christian handgun owners. “How did it end?” Bill asked me. I described how after firing on the shooter, Willeford pursued him in a high-speed chase which ended with the shooter dead in his vehicle from a self-inflicted gunshot. “Willeford was recently on the cover of an NRA magazine,” I added to emphasize that he exemplified the NRA conviction that only a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun.⁸

Bill surprised me with his impassioned response. “The NRA doesn’t get it,” he said. “That man would have been in violation of North Carolina law. The shooter was in retreat; he was leaving the scene. And Willeford pursued him by driving above the speed limit, endangering the lives of others in doing so.” Struggling to formulate a response, I resorted to jotting Bill’s words in my field notebook as the next scenario flashed onto the TV screen.

On my drive home, I found myself equally fascinated and perplexed. Bill’s recourse to scripture and his broader understanding of how a Christian should practice concealed carry limited what North Carolina state law declared to be lawful. It called into question NRA dogmatisms about “good” versus “bad guys.”

⁷ Saeed Ahmed, Doug Criss, and Emanuella Grinberg, “‘Hero’ Exchanged Fire with Gunman, then Helped Chase Him Down,” *CNN*, November 7, 2017, www.cnn.com/2017/11/05/us/texas-church-shooting-resident-action/.

⁸ See the cover of the January 2018 issue of *America’s 1st Freedom* and the corresponding cover story: Mark Chesnut, “I Never, Ever Thought that I Would Be that Guy,” *America’s 1st Freedom*, January 2018, 32–37.

But perhaps more fascinating, latent within Bill's conception of Christian concealed carry was a form of everyday just war reasoning that emphasized the *jus ad bellum* conditions of just cause, right intention, and last resort. While he framed his course as providing instruction in "defense of the body," he explicitly limited this to "your body, your family's, and the body of Christ," capturing the condition of just cause.⁹ His use of the metaphor of wheat and chaff to distinguish between proper and improper motivations for pursuing a concealed carry license reflected the condition of right intention. His repeated emphasis that one's "first priority is not to shoot," and, if possible, to avoid intervention mirrored the condition of last resort. Countering the logic of Stand Your Ground, Christian concealed carriers have a duty to retreat, if possible, when encountering a threat of "imminent death or great bodily harm." For Bill, 1 Corinthians 6:12 places a limit on Stand Your Ground.

In a later interview, Bill shared with me what his spouse and he would do in the case of a home invasion. Even in his home, Bill privileged the *jus ad bellum* condition of last resort. He told me that if an invader were to enter his home, his spouse and he would go into the room containing their gun safe and barricade the door with furniture. With their home alarm sounding, they would then use their landline to call 911. If the invader were to enter the bedroom, Bill would only take the shot as an absolute last resort—to protect his spouse's life or his own—even though North Carolina state law avers that he can do so lawfully as soon as the invader enters the home. Bill emphasized that if the invader were to ransack the home and not try to breach the barricaded room, he would not intervene. He would only defend life, not property. The many layers—physical and psychological—that Bill placed between himself and taking the shot fascinated me. His commitment to last resort limits not only what the law justifies under Stand Your Ground, but also under the Castle Doctrine. His dedication to practicing concealed carry and home security in a manner consistent with his faith leads him not to discriminate between public and private space. In both, Christianity places limits on his use of lethal force.¹⁰

⁹ Here, the "body of Christ" refers to the gathered ecclesial body on Sunday morning.

¹⁰ In refusing to discriminate between public and private space regarding his practice of armed self-defense, Bill renders the public-private distinction moot, a distinction presumed by liberal social thought and modern social life. He does so through recourse to divine law, which leads to an interesting—and unexpected—paradox. Against the expectation that he would not hesitate to use his firearms in public and private space and would view North Carolina state law as legally permitting this usage, Bill understands himself to be subject to a higher law, one which he aims to observe in his everyday practice as a religious believer. Theologically speaking, Bill's case is one in which divine law (his understanding of it, at least) trumps human or

CHRISTIAN HANDGUN OWNERSHIP AS STYLE

In Bill, I realized I had encountered something that might deserve to be called “Christian handgun ownership.” By this I do not mean someone who is a Christian and owns handguns, but someone for whom Christianity shapes, qualifies, and limits the everyday practices constitutive of this way of being in the world. In Bill’s case, this shaping and limiting corresponds to resources in the Christian tradition—namely, just war. But precisely how does Bill display a form of just war reasoning in his practices and self-conceptualizations? And what is the significance of this display? To address these questions, I begin by explaining why I describe Bill as employing an *everyday* form of just war reasoning, and how this generates a particular style of Christian handgun ownership characterized by moderation and reserve.

My use of the term *everyday* modifies what I identify as a form of just war reasoning in Bill’s account of Christian concealed carry. In the just war tradition, *jus ad bellum* names conditions that must be satisfied for the resort to war to be just—typically the conditions of just cause, last resort, proportionality, legitimate authority, right intention, and probability of success. *Jus in bello* names conditions necessary for conduct in war to be just—typically the conditions of discrimination (noncombatant immunity) and proportionality.¹¹ As an everyday form of just war reasoning, Bill’s account of Christian concealed carry, as described above, does not employ all of the criteria traditionally identified under the headings of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Neither does his account involve a formal or formulaic application of the criteria. Indeed, to look for and expect to find a total or formal usage of such criteria in an everyday mode of just war reasoning is to miss the point. As my ethnographic vignette indicates, Bill’s account of concealed carry is animated by a sensibility that emerges from his lived understanding of Christian commitment, and it is this sensibility that has resonances with certain *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* criteria. In other words, Bill is not a just war theorist, but a concealed carrier for whom Christianity places a check or limit on his practice in his everyday life.

civil law. As such, Bill is not quite the “repugnant cultural other” of left-wing cultural expectation, but something more complex. I draw the phrase “repugnant cultural other” from Susan Harding, who uses it to problematize “modernist presuppositions” regarding the study of particular kinds of cultural “others,” such as fundamentalist Christians (on whom Harding has written). See Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 373–393.

¹¹ See Helen Frowe, “The Just War Framework,” in *Oxford Handbook of Ethics of War*, ed. Seth Lazar and Helen Frowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44–58.

Bill's everyday mode of just war reasoning produces interesting—and unexpected—results, particularly in the aforementioned case of the Sutherland Spring church shooting. Bill there distinguished between justifiable and unjustifiable interventions on the part of Willeford. For Bill, Willeford was justified in taking the initial actions that led to the neutralization of the shooter, as the shooter constituted a threat to an ecclesial body at the time of his intervention. To draw on the language of 1 Corinthians 6:12, initially it was both lawful and expedient for Willeford to intervene in the situation with lethal force.

While Bill did not articulate this in terms of just war criteria, the way in which such criteria might be used to justify Willeford's engagement is fairly straightforward. Willeford's initial actions arguably satisfied the *jus ad bellum* conditions of just cause, right intention, proportionality, and last resort, providing partial justification for his decision to engage in the gunfight on just war grounds. Further, once engaged in the gunfight, Willeford satisfied the *jus in bello* conditions of discrimination and proportionality, taking the shot outside of the church rather than in the presence of noncombatants, and proportionally matching the firepower of the shooter with his AR-15.¹²

The remaining *jus ad bellum* conditions of legitimate authority and probability of success require more careful attention. The condition of legitimate authority must be considered in light of Willeford finding himself in a situation in which the police had not yet arrived, and in which he had sufficient reason to believe that death or great bodily harm had already been caused. As such, Willeford was justified in taking upon himself the police function of the state, serving as a legitimate authority given the absence of the state. Regarding the latter condition, it would have been nearly impossible for Willeford to determine his probability of success given the circumstances. His decision to intervene was based on limited information: sonic data (the sound of gunfire) and testimony (his daughter's description of seeing "a man wearing black tactical gear at the Baptist church").¹³ He did not know whether the shooter was acting alone or with a partner or team, nor did he have a sense of the shooter's proficiency with firearms. All said, it is unlikely that one can ever achieve epistemic confidence about one's prospects for success in such a situation. The psychological and physiological pressures experienced by those

¹² Willeford's taking the shot outside of the church was more a matter of circumstance than intention, as the shooter "emerged from the church" as Willeford approached the building. Michael J. Mooney, "The Hero of the Sutherland Springs Shooting Is Still Reckoning with What Happened That Day," *Texas Monthly*, November 2018, www.texasmonthly.com/articles/stephen-willeford-sutherland-springs-mass-murder/.

¹³ Mooney, "The Hero of the Sutherland Springs Shooting."

involved, combined with the need to respond quickly to mitigate injury and loss of life, do not accommodate making the kinds of calculations necessary for satisfying this particular *jus ad bellum* condition. Intellection must at some point give way to muscle memory and willful determination. Still, the scale tips toward Willeford's initial intervention being both lawful and expedient, all things considered.

For Bill, Willeford was not justified in carrying out the actions that followed—namely, pursuing the shooter in a high-speed chase. He cited three reasons for the unjustifiability of doing so: the shooter was in retreat and no longer constituted a threat; the pursuit required that Willeford, a civilian, break the law by driving well above the speed limit; and the pursuit could have harmed or killed innocent bystanders. In just war terms, the shooter no longer posed a threat, arguably dissolving the emergency that earlier gave Willeford just cause to use lethal force and take up the police function of the state. In threatening innocent bystanders during the chase, Willeford violated the *jus in bello* condition of discrimination.

Again, while Bill did not formally cite the criteria of *jus ad bellum* or *jus in bello* in his analysis of the Sutherland Springs church shooting, his analysis resonates with the just war tradition in terms of what I identify as an everyday form of just war reasoning. Bill arguably challenges a vision of handgun ownership marked by masculinist, heroic excess.¹⁴ For Bill, there are limits on the degree to which the citizenry can take up the police function of the state. If one does so, preserving the ability to discriminate between an unjust aggressor and innocent noncombatants is of paramount importance. Further, Bill understands that the distinction between good guys with guns and bad guys with guns is not a Manichean one. Against the NRA dogmatism that only a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun, Bill exhibits a more sophisticated anthropology, one that is theologically-oriented, cognizant of the human potential for sin. Bill recognizes that good guys with guns have the potential to become bad

¹⁴ This is not to say that Christian handgun owners do not participate in and reinforce patriarchal gender norms. In accord with the findings of sociologist Angela Stroud, many of my interlocutors described their reasons for engaging in concealed carry because of a responsibility they feel as husbands and fathers to protect their families, and others, more advanced in age, described firearms as a way of compensating for decreased physical ability, again in terms of this responsibility. For my interlocutors, guns can thus be understood as enabling the performance of a kind of “hegemonic masculinity,” a culturally-recognized masculine ideal that, in virtue of its contrast to the gendered expectations of women and marginalized men, legitimizes patriarchy. See Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

guys with guns absent the kinds of checks encapsulated in his usage of 1 Corinthians 6:12.

Theological anthropology aside, Bill's vision of Christian concealed carry is characterized by a sensibility of reservation and restraint. Recall the portion of the concealed carry course in which Bill led his students in a discussion of real-life cases drawn from various news sources of civilians using their guns to intervene in active shooter scenarios. While many of these uses were lawful according to North Carolina state law, Bill emphasized their inexpediency, concluding that non-intervention would have been a better choice more consistent with a Christian approach to concealed carry. For Bill, the threshold that must be satisfied for Christian concealed carriers to be justified in employing lethal force is high, not low. For him, Christian concealed carry is characterized by avoidance, moderation, and restraint.

CHRISTIAN HANDGUN OWNERS AS CHRISTIAN-PROTECTORS

Compared to my other interlocutors, Bill stands as the paragon of Christian handgun ownership as I have characterized it. But as my fieldwork came to reveal, many of my interlocutors enact modes of handgun ownership in which their Christian commitment places a check or limit on their practice—whether in terms of refusing to conceal carry in church despite feeling a desire to do so, choosing instead to trust in the efforts of the security team during worship; carrying a concealed firearm only when accompanying one's dependents; or refusing to see themselves as what sociologist Jennifer Dawn Carlson calls "citizen-protectors." In what follows, I characterize the citizen-protector model of handgun ownership and contrast it to that of my interlocutors, which I call the Christian-protector model.

Jennifer Dawn Carlson develops her account in *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*, an ethnography of gun carriers conducted in the postindustrial contexts of Detroit and Flint, Michigan.¹⁵ Through interviews and participant-observation with white and African American gun owners, Carlson describes how men employ guns in response to social precariousness and economic insecurity in ways that cut across racial divides. She argues that the use of guns in these contexts affects "the reformulation of citizenship to center on policing and protection," generating a class of citizens for whom "the act of killing to protect oneself and others [is] morally just, warranted, and respectable."¹⁶ Combined with the liberalization of

¹⁵ Jennifer Dawn Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 19.

firearm laws initiated by the lobbying efforts of the NRA—namely, the shift from may-issue to shall-issue systems for concealed carry licensing from the 1970s to the 2000s, to the more recent extension of the “No Duty to Retreat” doctrine from private to public space via Stand Your Ground laws¹⁷—the failure of the state to provide security for its citizens in Detroit and Flint generates a form of armed citizenship in which “gun carriers use firearms to actively assert their authority and relevance by embracing the duty to protect themselves and police others.”¹⁸

The way in which this policing by civil initiative manifests among Carlson’s interlocutors is, at times, dramatic and disturbing. Carlson opens *Citizen-Protectors* with two such examples. She tells the story of Corey, a white man who, while working the register at a corner store in Flint, shot and killed an African American man who brandished a weapon while demanding money of him; and Jason, an African American man who, while open carrying in Detroit at night as a means of deterring crime, was stopped by the police but eventually let go, leading bystanders to cheer and celebrate him.¹⁹ These examples illustrate how a citizen-protector orientation to guns can take shape in everyday contexts. They also help indicate the similarities between my interlocutors and Carlson’s subjects. Not unlike my interlocutors, Carlson’s subjects turn to handguns in response to a felt ethical demand that extends beyond personal self-defense; they respond to this demand in an embodied way, cultivating a lived relationship between their bodies and their firearms; and they engage in armed practices as ordinary citizens in their everyday lives. The key difference, however, lies in the citizen-protector’s embrace of policing as a civic duty—an embrace rejected by many of my interlocutors. Recalling Bill’s usage of 1 Corinthians 6:12, even when lawful, policing as a generalized civic duty rarely presents itself as expedient.

How might we draw out this contrast further? If the armed embodiment of citizen-protectors is characterized by a civilian form of policing, we might say that citizen-protectors adopt a centrifugal orientation. Directed outward rather than inward, all of space serves as a theater for policing for them. Further, all bodies, not simply those to whom they stand in a relationship of familial or ecclesial kinship, can serve as an object of protection, as citizen-protectors do not discriminate between those bodies they are willing to defend. In contrast, my interlocutors eschew the policing orientation of citizen-protectors. Theirs is a centripetal orientation in which they discriminate between those bodies for whom they feel themselves to

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of these shifts, see Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 5–6.

¹⁸ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 10.

¹⁹ Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors*, 1–4.

be responsible—their own, their family’s, and their church’s body—and those for whom they do not. This places constraints upon the kinds of spaces in which they engage in practices of protection. As described above, this posture is characterized by moderation and restraint, animated, at times, by what I call an everyday form of just war reasoning.

To press the contrast even further, it is worth reviewing an earlier article by Carlson, in which she draws on Foucault’s account of governmentality and sovereign power to argue that citizen-protectors are best theorized as “sovereign subjects,” exercising via guns “sovereign functions (particularly the execution of lethal and legitimate violence) that the state has typically monopolized.”²⁰ Because of the state’s inability to secure the common good of the citizenry in contexts of social decline (like Detroit), the sovereign subject finds itself legitimated *de facto* in taking up policing as civil initiative. Further, state-level legislative shifts establishing that citizens no longer have a duty to retreat in public space (Stand Your Ground Laws) legitimate *de jure* the exercise of this political subjectivity. Decentralized through processes of governmentality, sovereign power flows through these members of the citizenry, the full manifestation of which is disciplinary control over individual bodies according to a logic of “take life or let live” (as in the case of Corey).²¹

Again, my interlocutors reject the notion that their practice of concealed carry requires that they embrace a duty to protect or police others in general. Instead, they restrict this responsibility to their own bodies, the bodies of their family members, and their ecclesial body. Regarding their own body, even this is sometimes called into question: several interlocutors told me that if they were not fathers, they would not own firearms or conceal carry; they only do so to increase their chances of surviving a gunfight in order to stay alive and continue providing for their family. If they truly functioned as highly-localized manifestations of sovereign power, my interlocutors would not restrict the range of bodies they would be willing to defend. They recognize that the state continues to have a monopoly on violence. Put in just war terms, they recognize the state as the primary bearer of legitimate authority.

Further, in describing their motivations for practicing concealed carry or serving on their church’s security team, my interlocutors often cited themes of protection, service, and care, linking these themes to their vocation as Christian men. A megachurch security team leader

²⁰ Jennifer Dawn Carlson, “States, Subjects, and Sovereign Power: Lessons from Global Gun Cultures,” *Theoretical Criminology* 18, no. 3 (2014): 336.

²¹ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76* (New York: Picador, 1997), 241.

repeatedly used the phrase “protector” to describe himself during our interview, saying he has a “protector’s heart” because God “designed” him that way. He described the challenges of keeping a volunteer security team in place: “It’s boring as hell out here. You show up, drink your coffee, get bored and quit. It takes a particular individual to be a protector if that’s who God created you to be.” Regarding the familial body, many of my interlocutors told me that they see the protection of their families as integral to their role as fathers. Whether in relationship to their familial or ecclesial bodies, my interlocutors consistently frame their sense of obligation with reference to vocation and care.

For these reasons, I name the posture taken up by my interlocutors the Christian-protector model of handgun ownership in contrast to the citizen-protector model.²² And if my interlocutors are best understood as Christian-protectors who see handgun ownership and concealed carry as a mode of care, and at times frame this mode of care in reference to an everyday form of just war reasoning, then further engagement with the just war tradition illuminates even more the practices and self-conceptions of my interlocutors. I turn now to a particular trajectory within the tradition as it manifests in the work of Augustine and Paul Ramsey—the trajectory that conceptualizes war, when justified, as an expression of charity. I argue that Augustine and Ramsey crystalize the resonances between my interlocutors and just war, as they and my interlocutors see justified violence as coterminous with charity.

CHRISTIAN-PROTECTORS AND THE JUST WAR TRADITION

Among Christian theologians, Augustine is one of the earliest to draw charity and rightly-intended violence together. He does so by granting the intentionality of the human person, expressed in the faculty of the will, paramount importance in his moral and political thought. For Augustine, rightly-ordered intention indicates a proper ordering of loves, evincing the presence of *caritas* in the individual. Alternatively, disordered intention indicates a disordered self whose loves are governed by *cupiditas*.²³ Love and intention cannot be disassociated in Augustine’s anthropology, as love names that toward

²² As described earlier, I engaged in participant-observation and conducted qualitative interviews with twenty-five male Christian handgun owners. Consequently, questions may emerge regarding the generalizability of my claims concerning the Christian-protector model of handgun ownership given my sample size. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that this is a feature, not a bug, of qualitative research methodologies such as ethnography, which center long-term, relational modes of inquiry with human populations. I anticipate that my theoretical proposals will be tested and explored in other locales and within other communities of faith.

²³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.16.

which the human person wills or intends, whether positive or negative.²⁴ As developed in *The City of God*, this applies to communities as well: if a society is ordered or disordered, it is because of what it loves.²⁵

Because the human person is defined by its loves, intentionality serves as a linchpin in Augustine's moral theology. The moral valence of an action is, most fundamentally, a matter of the actor's intention.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, then, intention determinatively shapes how Augustine differentiates between just and unjust forms of violence. Following Ambrose, Augustine did not approve of killing in self-defense in private contexts, breaking with the Greco-Roman consensus that both individual and social bodies have the right to defend themselves via the principle of self-preservation.²⁷ For Augustine, intentionally killing in self-defense is driven by self-love and is thus disordered, as love of self rather than love of neighbor occupies the actor's intentionality under such circumstances. Intentionally killing in self-defense is thus never admissible under the scope of charitable action.

Yet Augustine held that soldiers participating in a just war kill without sin if they maintain right intention while doing so. While war is rendered just if the sovereign who wages it does so with right intention and for a just cause, the just participation of the soldier varies from individual to individual depending on whether he remains ordered by charity while soldiering. If he does so, abstaining from "the desire to do harm, cruelty in taking vengeance ... fierceness in rebellion, the lust for domination, and anything else of the sort"—what Augustine calls the "things that are rightly blamed in war"—he serves as a rightly ordered instrument of the sovereign who, in waging a just war, does so in obedience to God.²⁸ Warring in this way, then, whether from the throne or the ground, renders killing coterminous with charity. As such, just wars serve as implements by which the earthly city sustains a degree of tranquility, keeping the *libido dominandi* in check through coercive love.

²⁴ "A righteous will, then, is a good love; and a perverted will is an evil love" (Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 14.7).

²⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, 19.24.

²⁶ See, for example, Augustine's discussion of pride and charity in *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 8.9, or his treatment of the intent to deceive regarding lying in *The Enchiridion*, 18; *Against Lying*, 18. In the case of lying, the intent to deceive destroys the concord between the heart and the mouth required for truthful speech, rendering what is spoken duplicitous.

²⁷ See, for example, Augustine, "Letter 47 to Publicola."

²⁸ Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean (Contra Faustum Manichaeum)*, trans. Roland Teske, SJ, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. I/20, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2007), 22.74; see also *The City of God*, 1.21.

Here, Augustine draws charity and war together, establishing what would become a central trajectory of the just war tradition, the leitmotif of which is that recourse to, and participation in, legitimate violence should be directed by and infused with love. While this generates a paradox for many modern readers of Augustine, it does not for my interlocutors, who would agree with Augustine that rightly-intended violence can be an expression of love. Just as Augustine centers the *jus ad bellum* criteria of right intention in his account of justifiable violence, so do my interlocutors in their self-descriptions. Bill, for example, privileged right intention during his concealed carry course, arguing that only those seeking to engage in practices of protection on behalf of the vulnerable should pursue a concealed carry license, not those “legally seeking a thrill.” During an interview, a pastor told me the importance of having a vetting process when building a volunteer church security team, indicating that certain individuals may not be emotionally mature or stable enough to handle the responsibility. Only those whose intention is rightly oriented—or whose loves are properly ordered, to use Augustine’s language—should be granted the responsibility of enacting care on behalf of one’s familial and ecclesial bodies.

Among twentieth-century advocates of just war, Paul Ramsey best exemplifies this Augustinian linking of war and charity. Against Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism which sees love as an “impossible possibility,” Ramsey sought to base Christian ethics wholly on love—specifically, the love command as it appears in scripture.²⁹ He does so by resourcing the notion of covenant—the relationship formed by God with humanity as manifested in the history of Israel and the ministry of Jesus.³⁰ Through this covenant, humanity is invited to respond to God’s initiating expression of agape with love of neighbor. Contra Niebuhr’s uncoupling of love and justice, covenant enables Ramsey to reconcile love and justice, as justice flows from the human community’s adherence to God’s covenant-making by following the love command.³¹ With respect to war, the

²⁹ This is not to say that love is irrelevant for Niebuhr. As exemplified by Jesus, the “love ideal” remains “unattainable” yet “useful” insofar as it provides humanity with “an absolute standard by which to judge both personal and social righteousness,” and a possibility toward which to “strive.” See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings*, ed. R. B. Robertson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1957), 33, 38.

³⁰ Ramsey most prominently develops the notion of covenant in *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1950) and *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961).

³¹ In Ramsey’s final words in *Basic Christian Ethics* the Niebuhrian friction between love and justice finds its synthesis and resolution: “These two are, in fact, the same

differences between Niebuhr and Ramsey on war could not be starker. For Niebuhr, war is justifiable insofar as it leads to the restoration of justice.³² For Ramsey, war can be morally right in and of itself, not simply in terms of its ends, when waged in love of neighbor.³³

Despite these differences, Ramsey remains a Niebuhrian regarding the unattainability of embodying Jesus's ideals. Ramsey understands Jesus's specific teachings, such as the Beatitudes, to be "thoroughly eschatological" in nature, not fully realizable prior to Christ's return.³⁴ In reference to Matthew 5:5 where Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth," Ramsey writes:

Jesus was not so naïve as to suppose that by the *power* of their meekness the meek would sooner or later inherit the earth. To be realistic about the forces which triumph in the present age, if the meek ever inherit the earth, the not-so-meek would promptly take it away from them. Meekness and inheriting the earth are entirely separate matters; only the approaching kingdom brings them into connection.³⁵

Thus, while the "personal ethic" of Jesus might emphasize nonresistance and nonviolence, Ramsey diminishes the importance of this ethic for Christians today, classifying it as part of Jesus's "apocalyptically derived strenuous teachings."³⁶ He argues that Jesus's teachings and example can alternatively be understood as privileging a "preferential ethic of protection" for one's neighbor.³⁷ Further, when practiced on behalf of one's neighbor, this preferential ethic of protection accommodates coercive and violent forms of resistance. Protecting the innocent from harm, in other words, even to the point of killing an unjust aggressor, is not contrary to this alternative ethic for Ramsey; in fact, such interventions constitute one way of fulfilling the love command in the time of the *saeculum*,

thing: obeying the covenant and doing justice, love for neighbor and fulfilling the law" (388).

³² For his classic articulation of this position, see Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1940), 1–32.

³³ Ramsey develops his critique of Niebuhr in *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961) where he states that the "technical political reason" of Christian realism has led Protestant ethics into a "wasteland of utility" (6).

³⁴ Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 26.

³⁵ Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 26.

³⁶ Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 169–170.

³⁷ Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 166–71.

whether in everyday interpersonal contexts or the theater of interstate war.³⁸

Regarding interpersonal contexts, Ramsey—in contrast to Augustine—even permits that the use of lethal force for personal self-defense will, in certain cases, be congruent with the love command. Recall that for Augustine (and Ambrose), private self-defense is not admissible under the scope of charitable action as the use of lethal force to protect one's life is driven by love of self and thus disordered. Ramsey takes Augustine to task on this point, saying that "Ambrose and Augustine doubtless need to be criticized for their rather unqualified acceptance of public protection and also for their complete rejection of private self-defense."³⁹ He argues first that Augustine fails to recognize that the motivations governing interstate warfare is often likely driven by "collective egoism" and "self-interest."⁴⁰ To make a sharp distinction between personal and state-centric contexts in this regard is to fail to recognize that the disordering of loves runs up the scale, from individual persons to collectivized ones. Second, since love functions as an absolute moral norm for Ramsey, and since "a Christian does whatever love requires ... the possibility cannot be ruled out that on occasion defending himself may be a duty he owes to others."⁴¹ Thus, while for Ramsey the love command does not sanction recourse to lethal force for personal self-defense in each and every case, neither does it propel him toward the opposite Augustinian extreme. As the servant of love, the Christian stands in an ambiguous space, one in which the Christian ethic of protection may justify such recourse under particular circumstances.

In short, Ramsey legitimates the use of force, coercive and lethal, according to his Christian ethic of protection. Such uses are most clearly expressive of love when exercised on behalf of the vulnerable in a manner proportionate to the threat, whether in the localized contexts of everyday life, or the global theater of international affairs. In doing so, Ramsey draws the use of force under the scope of love's actions. Herein lies the connection with my interlocutors, for whom the omnipresent threat of encountering an active shooter renders certain bodies particularly vulnerable within their phenomenal field—their familial and ecclesial bodies, as well as their own. Their firearms-related practices constitute a way of responding to the felt ethical demand to defend these bodies. In Ramsey's language, my

³⁸ See, for example, Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 165. Ramsey develops this view more fully in *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Scribners, 1968).

³⁹ Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 175.

⁴⁰ Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 175.

⁴¹ Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 176–77.

interlocutors understand themselves to be enacting a Christian ethic of protection as part of their vocation as husbands, fathers, and community members. Hence the security team leader who understands himself to be a protector, to be driven by a “protector’s heart,” or the pastor who views armed church security teams to be a necessary tool against potential threats to the gathered ecclesial body.

Further, just as for Ramsey the demands of neighbor love may at times legitimate the use of lethal force in personal self-defense, my interlocutors similarly frame their firearms-related practices with reference to the obligations they have toward their dependents. As one interlocutor described,

I have to survive for my kids at my age. You know, it’s imperative that I survive. It would be devastating for them if I died. But, if they were grown, then it’s different. I can see myself not concealed carrying when they’re grown. Because I don’t care if I get killed. I’m going to heaven. I don’t care.

We thus find, even here, clear echoes of Ramsey’s sanction of private self-defense in light of the duties we have to others.

Let us review the ground covered. I have argued that my interlocutors are best characterized as Christian-protectors who take up a centripetally-oriented posture with their guns, rather than as citizen-protectors who adopt a centrifugally-oriented posture of policing. In doing so, I have resisted moves that would reduce my interlocutors to a class of “repugnant cultural others,” characterizing them as modest regarding their firearms practices, tempering, in this way, their “strangeness.” In arguing that they at times employ an everyday form of just war reasoning, I have woven them into the Christian theological tradition via just war, seeking also in this way to make them “familiar.”⁴² In identifying resonances between Augustine, Ramsey, and my interlocutors, I have tightened this weaving, showing that my interlocutors—and the Christian-protector orientation, more broadly—can be situated within the trajectory of the just war tradition that sees rightly intended violence as expressive of charity. In our politically polarized times, this framing takes seriously the lived moral experience of my interlocutors and those who turn to guns in response to such felt ethical demands.

Yet to stop here would be to leave several things unaddressed. To turn to these things and gesture toward the inability of the just war tradition to close the gap between description and norm regarding guns in the United States, I consider the manifestation of an ethic of

⁴² On the “repugnant cultural other,” see fn. 10. On the language of “strange” and “familiar,” see fn. 3.

protection among African Americans during the civil rights era: the case of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an African American self-defense group founded in the mid-1960s that viewed firearms as integral to the advancement of civil rights. Turning to this example enables me to highlight the similarities between my interlocutors and the Deacons for Defense and Justice through the prism of the just war tradition. Both forms of armed embodiment find justification under the just war trajectory considered above, particularly in terms of Ramsey's agapic-oriented preferential ethic of protection. Yet just war fails to account for the morally significant differences between my interlocutors and the Deacons for Defense and Justice, which suggests we must ultimately look beyond the just war tradition to develop a Christian ethics of the gun.

THE DEACONS FOR DEFENSE AND JUSTICE

As narrated by Nicholas Johnson in *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms*, guns have served as a key implement in African American efforts at communal self-determination throughout US history.⁴³ The role played by firearms in such efforts, argues Johnson, is not so variant or haphazard to be beyond characterization; rather, it is constitutive of a tradition—a “black tradition of arms.” Key to this tradition is the manner in which it “elevates and enshrines the distinction between self-defense against imminent threats and organized political violence seeking group advancement.”⁴⁴ Broad in scope, Johnson's account discusses a multitude of figures and cases to show that, from the antebellum period to the civil rights era, the use of firearms by African Americans has privileged individual and communal self-defense rather than initiatory political violence.⁴⁵

⁴³ Nicholas Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2014).

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 58.

⁴⁵ Of course, the history Johnson narrates was not free from internal controversy regarding the tension between recourse to firearms for self-defense versus organized political violence. But this is precisely what is to be expected of tradition. Here I follow Alasdair MacIntyre, who defines tradition as “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted” (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988], 12). In the black tradition of arms, African Americans negotiated their relationship to firearms (a set of social practices) in the context of a white supremacist society (“critics and enemies external to the tradition”) and in relationship to each other (“internal, interpretative debates”) in light of the goods toward which firearms-

Significantly, Johnson emphasizes that armed self-defense was not only essential for African Americans, given the ongoing threat of racialized violence, but often embraced by African Americans alongside “political nonviolence without any sense of contradiction.”⁴⁶ As such, *Negroes and the Gun* stands among recent efforts to contest accounts of the civil rights movement as strictly pacifist, arguing that the success of the movement depended, in part, upon the presence of and occasional recourse to firepower.⁴⁷

Among the cases Johnson considers, The Deacons for Defense and Justice (DDJ) provide a key example for reframing the reflections developed thus far in this paper.⁴⁸ Founded in 1964 in Jonesboro, Louisiana, and spreading soon thereafter to Bogalusa, Louisiana, and later to Mississippi and Alabama, the DDJ was an African American armed community defense group that first emerged in response to the intimidation and terrorization of civil rights activists by the Ku Klux Klan, oftentimes with police support. Among its earliest efforts, the DDJ protected Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) activists who moved to Jonesboro in the summer of 1964 in order to “test” illegal segregation laws.

Shortly after their arrival, the CORE activists moved into a home—the Jonesboro “Freedom House”—quickly becoming a target of the Klan, which “regularly fired into the air around the house, shot through its windows, or drove by shouting threats.”⁴⁹ Their organizing efforts were likewise met with Klan harassment. As a result, a coterie of African American men led by Earnest “Chilly Willy” Thomas began to guard the Freedom House and accompany CORE activists while they carried out their organizing work throughout Jonesboro. At first, Thomas and his group provided security without firearms, but that soon changed. As the summer progressed, “police and Klan harassment of CORE workers became routine,” enflaming tensions between the Klan and Jonesboro’s white police force, on the one hand,

related practices were oriented (whether survival, the advancement of civil rights, etc.).

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 13.

⁴⁷ See also Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Like Johnson, Cobb also characterizes the role of “armed self-defense [in] black struggle” as a “tradition” in *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed*, 1–2.

⁴⁸ In addition to Johnson, I also depend upon Cobb’s account of the DDJ, which he develops in “Standing Our Ground,” in *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed*, 187–226, and Hill’s *The Deacons for Defense*.

⁴⁹ Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed*, 196.

and CORE activists and the black community, on the other.⁵⁰ Concealed carry became a regular feature of the guardians' methods.

One evening in late July, an "assistant police chief led a fifty-car Ku Klux Klan caravan through [Jonesboro's] black neighborhood ... [which] threw leaflets denouncing the "outside agitators" and desegregation efforts in Jonesboro."⁵¹ Following this, an armed white mob of more than one hundred men assembled at the jail where CORE organizers were being held. This brazen display by the Klan "convinced many folk of the need for something more systematic than the ad hoc decisions of black men," planting the "seed" for the DDJ.⁵² With the encouragement of CORE's Charlie Fenton, the DDJ were "formally incorporated" in early January of 1965.⁵³

As Johnson and Cobb describe, Fenton played a pivotal role in helping set the terms of the collaboration between CORE and the DDJ. Despite CORE's Christian pacifist roots and commitment to nonviolent direct action, the events of summer 1964 indicated to CORE activists the danger of living and carrying out their organizing efforts in Jonesboro without the support of armed security. Yet the DDJ could not adopt CORE's philosophy of nonviolent direct action. A compromise was struck, in which the two groups would remain distinct from each other but work side-by-side, with the DDJ "standing on the sidelines and stepping in if someone threatened to harm the nonviolent activists."⁵⁴ CORE activists thus continued with nonviolent direct action and the DDJ with practices of armed self-defense, providing security for CORE as they carried out their work, establishing a division of labor that benefitted both groups. While Fenton hoped that the DDJ would eventually relinquish their use of guns, he said, with regard to Jonesboro, "No one can tell what would have happened here if the Deacons hadn't formed their own ideas of protection."⁵⁵ The result was a "movement that combined nonviolent struggle and armed self-defense to protect that struggle."⁵⁶

This said, Johnson argues that as the DDJ expanded their chapters and membership, their practices pressed deeper into the "boundary-land" between self-defense and organized political violence, generating fierce criticism from opponents to the civil rights movement, and ambivalence, as well as critique, from those within

⁵⁰ Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 199.

⁵¹ Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 199.

⁵² Johnson, *Negroes with Guns*, 271.

⁵³ Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 201.

⁵⁴ Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 197.

⁵⁵ Fenton in Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 202.

⁵⁶ Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 212.

it.⁵⁷ Aware that the DDJ threatened coalitional support for the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., would aver in 1965 that

The line of demarcation between aggressive and defensive violence is very slim. The Negro must have allies to win his struggle for equality. And our allies will not surround a violent movement. What protects us from the Klan is to expose its brutality. We can't outshoot the Klan. We would only alienate our allies and lose sympathy for our cause.⁵⁸

The catalyst for this statement was the 1965 shooting of Alton Crowe, a white man, by Deacon Henry Austin during a protest march in Bogalusa, Louisiana—a case showing that “the boundary against political violence was not really a line so much as it was a minefield, a zone of dangerous decision making where individual exigencies crashed into the long-term strategies and aspirations of the group.”⁵⁹ And yet King, as if to prove his initial point, had according to FBI reports the DDJ in his employ the following year while delivering a speech in Chicago.⁶⁰ If these reports are to be believed, then even King navigated these debates with the assistance of prudence rather than principle alone, recognizing that prudential judgment may sometimes side with armed self-defense given the goods which the civil rights movement aimed to secure.

Despite these tensions, the DDJ provide a compelling example of the black tradition of arms, one in which a communal recourse to guns privileged armed self-defense rather than organized political violence. Defensive rather than initiatory and retaliatory violence served as the Deacons' north star. In just war terms, the philosophy and practices of the Deacons emphasized right intention on the part of their members. Further, the Deacons aimed to serve the vulnerable neighbor in their midst. While the DDJ did not legitimate themselves in reference to the just war tradition, nor in reference to the Christian theological tradition more broadly, their practices find justification under the trajectory of just war reasoning considered in this paper, particularly in terms of Ramsey's preferential ethic of protection. Not unlike my interlocutors, the DDJ constitute a class of “protectors” or “just warriors,” who, through a communally-oriented mode of armed embodiment, engaged in a form of care for the vulnerable neighbor.

⁵⁷ To draw again upon MacIntyre, this is to be expected of tradition—in this case, the black tradition of arms—which negotiates itself with reference to external critics and internal debates. See fn. 45.

⁵⁸ King in Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 282.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 281.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 282; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 231–32.

DISCRIMINATING BETWEEN TRADITIONS OF DEFENSE

If both the DDJ and my interlocutors find justification when considered through the lens of Ramsey's agapic-oriented account of just war, how might we make sense of the obvious differences between these two orientations? First, both the DDJ and my interlocutors engage in a traditioned mode of inquiry regarding the role of firearms in their everyday practices. While the forms of debate and discernment in the black tradition of arms, particularly during the civil rights era, were more centralized than the forms engaged in by my interlocutors, both can be understood as engaging in "an historically extended, socially embodied argument," one in which the goods constitutive of the tradition, and the practices and virtues necessary for achieving those goods, undergo recurring evaluation, negotiation, and adjustment.⁶¹ The DDJ engaged in this work within their chapters and in relationship to broader national debates about the role armed self-defense should play in advancing civil rights, and the relationship of armed self-defense to nonviolent direct action. My interlocutors do so in the context of their churches and families, discerning communally—albeit in highly-localized contexts—the role firearms should play in their domestic and ecclesial environs. Further, one might discern structural similarities in the importance of figures like King and Williams, and the positions they embodied and inspired in the lives of everyday African American gun owners, with the role played by figures like Willeford in the lives of my interlocutors. Each of these figures represents the codification of a particular philosophy and posture regarding how to practice—or not to practice—armed embodiment in one's everyday life. As archetypes or moral exemplars, they direct how everyday subjects understand and negotiate their own practices within the tradition of armed embodiment they occupy, tradition here conceptualized as an historically extended and socially embodied process of discernment and negotiation.

Yet the historical antecedent of the black tradition of arms marks the key difference between these traditions. The original wound from which the black tradition of arms emerges, and to which it responds, is America's original sin: the wound of chattel slavery and its afterlives in the US American context. The black tradition of arms is preceded by a historical evil that made it practically impossible for the victims of chattel slavery to uphold a distinction between defensive and retaliatory violence. Regarding the kinds of violence engaged in by enslaved Africans against their masters, Johnson writes, "Many acts of resistance defy rigid boundaries, demonstrating both a personal fight against the immediate violence of slavery and a political

⁶¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 222.

resistance against the slave system. The black tradition of arms grows out of this milieu.”⁶² Accordingly, the distinction between armed self-defense and organized political violence prized by the tradition was hard-won. It could only emerge with slavery’s abolishment, as slavery itself constituted “a state of war.”⁶³

Beginning with the antebellum period, however, the constitution of African Americans as a people comes to have promise in the US. Under these circumstances the distinction between armed self-defense and organized political violence emerges and eventually becomes codified. Given the possibility of encountering racialized violence in their everyday lives, recourse to armed self-defense by African American individuals and communities becomes prudentially sound, as the state either would or could not intervene in time on behalf of African Americans, regardless of its claim to support the dignity and rights of its African American citizenry. Recourse to armed self-defense served as a way of responding to disparities in power given the legacies of oppression African Americans faced. As such, it served as one instance among many in which African Americans could engage in the practice of “forming a people as a response to powerlessness.”⁶⁴ The black tradition of arms thus names a particular democratic practice by which African Americans have sought to form themselves into a “nation within a nation” in response to the white supremacist forces and legacies that seek to deny African Americans their individual and collective personhood.

The tradition and practices of my Christian handgun-owning interlocutors do not emerge from this kind of wound. Rather, my interlocutors take up a posture of armed embodiment in response to the specter of the active shooter—a potential future violence. This suggests it is worth contrasting these traditions of defense in terms of their temporal orientation. My interlocutors inhabit a temporal imaginary charged with the anticipation of violence, an imaginary directed toward a horizon that may one day be irrupted by an active shooter situation. The black tradition of arms, in contrast, is temporally hemmed in on both sides, emerging from racialized violence while ever-facing the possibility of encountering such violence again. It is a tradition and set of practices taken up in both the aftermath and anticipation of violence.

Further, while the specter of the active shooter gives the sense of precariousness felt by my interlocutors a certain omnipresence, as an active shooter can be encountered in any space at any time, throughout

⁶² Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 32.

⁶³ Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 58.

⁶⁴ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 82.

its history the black tradition of arms has had to respond to a threat exponentially more dangerous. Whether in terms of community-organized racial terror (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan) or state complicity with such terror (in which those charged with protecting citizens—the police—permit or assist in the carrying out of such terror), the black tradition of arms emerged in response to a living and actual omnipresent threat of racialized violence in every aspect of African American everyday life, not one more penumbral in quality. To render these traditions morally equivalent is to fail to attend to this set of crucial differences.

CONCLUSION

Here appear the shortcomings of the just war tradition: despite providing a language by which to describe the orientation of the DDJ and my interlocutors in terms of a preferential ethic of protection, just war fails to attend to contextually significant factors that must be considered when reflecting upon the moral import of these traditions, practices, and forms of life. In other words, while just war—particularly the trajectory that places justified violence under the scope of charitable action—assists in framing the lived experience of the DDJ and my interlocutors in a Christian ethical register, it cannot close the gap between description and norm regarding the place of guns in the United States. Other approaches are needed. Where do we go from here?

While several possibilities exist, I will name two which I aim to develop in future work on this topic: a liberationist approach that centers in its analysis those who suffer the brunt of firearm-caused death and injury in the United States; and an approach that turns to just peacemaking theory given the shortcomings identified here regarding just war. Ultimately, this paper has been ground-clearing in nature—to show that the just war tradition can assist Christian ethical reflection on guns as it seeks to render descriptive claims about Christian handgun owners in a Christian ethical register, one countering the stridency that marks the debate about guns in the United States by displaying the texture and complexity of my interlocutors' lived experience. Just war helps us attend to the moral dimensions of this lived experience and how my interlocutors use guns to respond to a felt ethical demand regarding those they perceive to be vulnerable to harm. But the discovery of faithful, hopeful, and loving judgments regarding guns in the United States requires that we ultimately look beyond the tradition in the ways intimated above.^M

Michael R. Grigoni is Assistant Professor in the Department for the Study of Religions at Wake Forest University, where he teaches courses in religion, politics, and the history of Christianity. His current

project explores the relationship of guns to American Christianity and is based on fieldwork he carried out with Christian handgun owners and Christian anti-gun violence activists in central North Carolina. He holds a PhD in Religion from Duke University.