

Gun Culture, Free Riding, and Nothing Short of Conversion

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MODERN PEOPLE WHO ARE WELL EDUCATED, DO WORK ON social policy, and read journals like this—more likely “liberals” of some kind—are not the sort who hand out tracts, buttonhole others, and press them to convert. They are more likely to denounce “proselytism” as a sin than denounce fornication or whatever else we picture the Puritans to have obsessed over. Boisterous talk of the need for conversion or concerted efforts to proselytize and win the world for Christ in our generation are considered disrespectful of other cultures. Yet here we are, dedicating pages to examining, perhaps denouncing, and probably trying to overturn something that many call—*nota bene*—“the gun culture” in the United States. What they have in mind might more precisely be labeled the “defensive gun culture” that has less and less to do with hunting or recreation but instead strives for personal self-protection.¹ Either way, what bears noting is that in this case, Christian gun control advocates who are more likely than not “liberal”

¹ “Defensive gun culture” as I am using the term corresponds with what sociologist David Yamane calls “Gun Culture 2.0.” See David Yamane, “The Sociology of US Gun Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 7 (July 2017), doi:10.1111/soc4.12497. Some may wish to distinguish between different gun *cultures*: (1) the historic use of firearms primarily as a tool for economically-integral hunting, (2) later recreational use of firearms for sport and non-essential hunting, and now (3) the culture of gun ownership motivated by the desire for self-protection. I certainly recognize that the first of these is still possible apart from the others, though increasingly rare. My own father-in-law was a conscientious objector in World War II and a self-supported Mennonite pastor in a hard-scrabble region of the country; he depended on venison and fish to relieve pressure on the family budget, but as a pacifist would never have shot a gun at another human being to protect himself or his family. So for the sake of precision, as well as respect for hunters like my father-in-law, it seems wise to speak more narrowly of “defensive gun culture.” Still, I do worry that any distinguishable gun *cultures* in the United States are but layers in what is becoming fused into a single gun culture. After all, the historical reality of the independent frontiersman hunting to feed himself or his family (#1) laid the basis for the culture of recreational hunting (#2) lingering long past subsistence economies. Together these have shaped the mythology of the gun-wielding protector (#3) who in the cinematic imagination might be a solitary lawman but can easily become a vigilante when necessary.

Christians, do want to change a culture. And that is as it should be. Indeed, Christians of the sort who advocate for gun control ought to put the righteous urgency of conversion back on the table.

Once we recognize and name what we are up against in the defensive gun culture of the contemporary United States, we may have to admit that it will remain insoluble without something approaching mass conversion. To be sure, gun control advocates offer many good reasons to regulate and reduce the presence of guns in the United States. Other articles in this issue will do so, and I expect them to be cogent. Generally, however, such reasons and the legal or policy alternatives they present address aggregates. In other words, most are collective reasons as to why more people in society would be safer and better off if there were fewer guns present and circulating in society. While it is impossible to determine the exact number of guns in private hands in the United States, what is indisputable is that there are by far more of them per capita than in any other country in the world.² Especially now that so many guns have been physically manufactured and dispersed throughout US society, any attempt to reverse course and reduce gun ownership will face a classic “collective action problem.” Whether the relevant point of decision is selling back guns or willingly relinquishing them or maybe even just voting, the problem will be to convince individuals to work together for a solution that would benefit them *all*, when too many find incentives not only to hang back from collective action but actively to resist. After all, any *one* person or family can easily imagine a moment of extreme crisis that would give them reasons (of a sort), in that moment, to use a gun.

Now that so many guns are out there, current gun owners or gun-rights advocates perceive themselves to have even more compelling reasons to bear firearms. Even if they could somehow be brought to recognize that everyone would be safer if there were fewer guns in

² In their indispensable book *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), Philip J. Cook and Kristin A Goss explained the difficulty identifying a precise number of guns circulating in the United States (2–4), but landed conservatively on a “reasonable ballpark estimate” of three hundred million as of 2018. The Geneva-based Small Arms Survey arrived at a significantly higher number in 2017—393 million or 120.5 guns for every 100 persons in the United States (Aaron Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers*, briefing paper [Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2018], 4, www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf). By comparison, the next-highest number per capita in the Small Arms Survey was 52.8 per 100 persons in Yemen—a country embroiled in a brutal civil war. Privately held guns in the United States are concentrated among a third of US citizens, according to the Pew Research Center, but fully 36 percent more were willing to consider owning a gun as of 2017 (Kim Parker, Juliana Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, J. Baxter Oliphant, and Anna Brown, *America’s Complex Relationship with Guns: An in-Depth Look at the Attitudes and Experiences of US Adults* [Pew Research Center, 2017], 4, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/06/22/americas-complex-relationship-with-guns).

circulation, it may be too late. They will be free-riding on that social peace which comes from relying not on firearms or fear but on the oft-taken-for-granted web of mutual trust, agreed-upon norms, and patient conversation guiding human interaction among most people, even gun owners themselves, most of the time. Even if they are objectively free riders in that sense, they will see themselves as patriots protecting themselves in an increasingly dangerous society. Their own individual reasons for self-preservation will diverge from collective reasoning about what best serves the common good. Arguments about what happens to them or their loved ones when guns are so readily available—quicker and more efficient suicide attempts; accidental discharges, perhaps by children—may attempt to break through from collective to personal reasoning. Yet solid firearm training and responsible use of gun lockers and safeties by them and “people like them” provide reassurance that they can remain exceptions. And perhaps they are. Or perhaps many are wrong. Either way, the point is the same: this line of thinking and deciding will always remain available, ever enticing. And with it, the free-rider problem.

Unfortunately, philosophers, social scientists, and economists alike have shown that free-rider problems can at best be mitigated and may be well-nigh insoluble. If reasons for free riding can only be renounced, not argued down, we may have to admit—as an objective statement, not some kind of religious appeal—that gun control requires nothing short of conversion.

GOOD ARGUMENTS, THWARTED

The website of the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence—the most visible lobbying group for this purpose in the United States—provides us with a baseline of standard arguments for gun control. It identifies an accumulation of social and economic problems gun violence either creates or exacerbates, and gun control would hopefully reduce.³ The indispensable and even-handed book by Philip J. Cook and Kristin Goss *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know* cites additional arguments and helps fill out those from the Brady Center.⁴ Negative effects of the defensive gun culture on individual gun owners and their families are among them, implying one kind of argument for gun control. Strikingly, however, even these are often stated as collective reasons to counter aggregate harms.

³ Brady Center, “Our Resources,” www.bradyunited.org/resources. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from the Brady Center will be taken from pages that branch off from this one.

⁴ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*. Encyclopedic rather than a work of advocacy, this book provides arguments and facts favorable to both sides of the debate. I cite it simply to supplement what the Brady Center offers.

Standard Arguments for Gun Control

Indeed, the issues that the Brady Center listed as of early 2021 on a page explicitly entitled “Effects of Gun Violence” are all aggregates:

1. *Housing prices and local economy.* Neighborhoods associated with gun violence attract fewer businesses and thus offer fewer jobs. Housing prices are lower, along with credit scores and homeownership rates.

2. *Medical costs.* The Brady Center offered statistics from 2010, in which thirty-six thousand victims of firearms assaults went to emergency rooms, and twenty-five thousand of these were admitted to the hospital. Over half of the estimated \$630 million in medical treatment for gun injuries was charged to publicly funded health insurance, and thus taxpayers.

3. *Public health.* Other health costs may be indirect yet constitute no less of a “public health crisis,” as the American Medical Association has labeled it, and 87 percent of Americans agreed. As the Brady Center explained, “People who are impacted by gun violence may experience stress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The effects of this harm extend not just to survivors but also to witnesses, bystanders, neighbors, and all those who love them.”

4. *Living in fear.* This effect of gun violence certainly has a very personal dimension. Teens fearful of school shootings and their parents stand out here, with students of color expressing the highest level of concern. Continuing to highlight public health, though, the Brady Center’s comment is a generalized one: “Even living under the threat of gun violence affects our health.”

Other issues around which the Brady Center organizes its advocacy can certainly be quite personal, not only in their effects but in the dimension upon which I am homing in—posing relevant decision points—yet they are most convincing in the aggregate:

5. *Risks to families.* The Brady Center has organized much of its educational work under the rubric of ending “family fire,” defined as “a shooting involving an improperly stored or misused gun in the home that results in death or injury.” Framing the issue this way has allowed the center to draw gun owners into conversation about ways to reduce gun violence through means short of legislated gun control—keeping firearms safely “locked, unloaded, separate from ammunition, and inaccessible to children.”⁵ Of course the argument that gun owners are, on balance, putting their families into greater

⁵ Brady Center, “End Family Fire,” www.bradyunited.org/program/end-family-fire. See also Brady Center, *A Comprehensive Approach to Preventing Gun Violence: 116th Congress* (Washington, DC: Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2019), 6, www.bradyunited.org/the-brady-plan.

danger of accidental death than they are preventing can also be a prominent argument for gun control.⁶ To be convinced, however, gun enthusiasts would have to accept that what holds “on balance” outweighs the individual circumstances they envision.

6. *Suicide*. Closely related is the increased risk that suicide attempts will be successful when the firepower of firearms is within reach. The gun owner him/herself may be the one to suffer this form of “family fire.” The Brady Center cited findings published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* according to which guns in the home increase the risk of completed suicides by 300 percent.⁷

As vivid as these dangers are—even or especially in the form of personal anecdotes—individuals deciding whether to purchase a gun or to vote to preserve an absolute right to gun ownership can still assure themselves that *they themselves* will remain responsible gun owners, well-trained in gun safety, and that other people outside of their social circles are the ones vulnerable to mental illness, for example. As compelling as a 300-percent statistical increase may be “overall,” in the aggregate, it may scarcely influence them at their own points of decision. So too with two additional kinds of societal harms that surface in Cook and Goss and that argue for gun control:

7. *Violent crime rates*. Not only does the United States have more violent crime than other high-income countries, according to Cook and Goss, “where the US rates are really off the scale is with respect to homicide, and these high homicide rates are largely the product of America’s outsized rates of *gun* homicide.” Compared to Canada, for example, the gun homicide rate in the United States in 2017 was “a staggering 510% higher.”⁸

8. *Intensification of violence*. Correlation is not causation, however, so Cook and Goss took pains to emphasize that the issue is not reducible to a simplistic claim such as “more guns, more crime.” Rather, guns *intensify* violence:

They take a bad situation and make it deadly. And because guns can be used to kill quickly, with little effort and from a distance, they give individuals who are so inclined the capacity to terrorize neighbor-

⁶ While recognizing the legitimate reasons that gun owners might want guns in their home, Cook and Goss note that “those who keep a loaded handgun accessible to fend off intruders buy their sense of security at a price of an increased chance of misuse by household members, especially if there are children at home, or violence-prone adults, or anyone who abuses drugs or is suicidal” (Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 23).

⁷ Andrew Anglemyer, Tara Horvath, and George Rutherford, “The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 160, no. 2 (21 January 2014): 101–10, doi:10.7326/M13–1301.

⁸ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 53.

hoods, assassinate even well-guarded public officials, and perpetrate one-man rampages in schools, workplaces, houses of worship, and other public places.⁹

Still, to a confident gun enthusiast for whom self-defense is the overbearing consideration, “quickly” and “deadly” may well be selling points, not alarm bells. While statistical studies pile up, the point of decision for a policymaker seeking to reduce aggregate harms remains quite distant from that of a gun owner envisioning an exceptionally immediate harm and hoping to counter it.

THE FREE-RIDER PROBLEM

One additional argument does begin to address the free-rider problem, insofar as it asks gun owners or potential gun owners to examine their assumptions about the dynamics at play in that narrow moment of immediate crisis in which they hope to act in an exceptional manner, whatever the overall statistics regarding the dangers of gun ownership. In this highly personal moment even social scientists spending their days thinking about policies that will serve the common good might nonetheless imagine a scenario wherein a loaded gun and the training to use it safely could make them and their families safer, not in the aggregate, but in the only available moment that matters *right then, right now*. However likely or unlikely to happen to any given person, this is the scenario around which gun debates pivot. As Cook and Goss put it,

Personal safety is a vital matter, and self-protection is a more compelling rationale for owning guns than recreation. We can all conjure up the nightmare scenario of being defenseless in a violent confrontation with a burglar, mugger, carjacker, or rapist. For some people, the ready availability of a firearm brings peace of mind. Indeed, the predominant motivation for owning a gun is protection against other people.¹⁰

Will it work? Even-handed scholars that they are, Cook and Goss began their answer with a “qualified yes,” though adding that: “Someone who is able to effectively deploy a firearm when attacked or seriously threatened may emerge from the encounter in better shape than if he or she had been unarmed.” Yet the qualifiers to that “yes” are serious: “While it is surely possible to imagine instances in which having ready access to a firearm would be a lifesaver, it is also possible that it would make a bad situation worse.”¹¹ This then could be a final

⁹ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 2, 63.

¹⁰ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 18.

¹¹ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 19.

argument against owning guns for the purpose of self-protection—brandishing a gun will as often as not lead to an escalation by the very attacker one hopes to fend off.

9. *Escalation of immediate threats.* The statistics as to whether victims avoid bodily injury when they attempt to protect themselves with a gun turn out to be inconclusive.¹² While guns may help *some* to emerge unharmed, according to Cook and Goss,

It is also true that introducing a firearm into the confrontation may escalate the level of violence and ultimately result in greater harm to the victim than would have been caused by alternative strategies—such as fleeing, reasoning with the assailant, or summoning help. And there is always the possibility that the “victim” will misunderstand the other person’s intentions, in which case the gun can be the mechanism for a tragic mistake.¹³

Pointing a gun at an intruder attempts to induce fear in hopes that the adversary will back down, but also gives them a reason to pull their own trigger sooner rather than later. Rather than convincing the aggressor to stand down, one may simply be accelerating a vicious cycle of increasingly dangerous mimetic reaction. Cook and Goss summarized: “Common sense suggests that using a gun in response to a perceived threat could make things better or worse,” but in either case what is certain is that gun use “tends to up the ante in the confrontation.”¹⁴

¹² Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 18–19.

¹³ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 19. Although I am trying to give the benefit of the doubt to gun owners by stipulating good training and able marksmanship, note that we have now narrowed the scenario considerably. If we were to begin panning out from the exceptional to the average again, all kinds of things could go wrong. In her classic essay in favor of pacifism, the folk singer Joan Baez began her deconstruction of the situation in which she might hypothetically protect her grandmother from an attacker by making this point through humor:

“Say he had a gun, and he was about to shoot her. Would you shoot him first?”

“Do I have a gun?”

“Yes.”

“No. I’m a pacifist, I don’t have a gun.”

“Well, say you do.”

“All right. Am I a good shot?”

“Yes.”

“I’d shoot the gun out of his hand.”

“No, then you’re not a good shot.”

“I’d be afraid to shoot. Might kill Grandma.”

Joan Baez, “What Would You Do If?,” *Theology Today* 25, no. 4 (1969): 478. The essay first appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1968, 32–34, and later in Joan Baez, *Daybreak* (New York: Dial, 1968), 131–138.

¹⁴ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 20.

So where does that leave us? Gun advocates will undoubtedly marshal arguments to counter each of the nine points I have listed above, while gun-control advocates will then proffer counter-counterarguments. My purpose here is not to adjudicate but simply to drive home this point: even if arguments for gun control prove better and more convincing by the standards of social science, the free-rider problem will persist. At the point of decision indeed so often decisive—where enough people set society's agenda—we are at best at a stand-off.

Reading Cook and Goss, one can watch the free-rider problem snapping debates back toward sole consideration of what will happen to me or my loved ones in an imaginable, fear-inducing situation—back from aggregate considerations about what policies would be best for the common good to individual considerations gun owners find convincing. A single paragraph may illustrate:

Perceptions of whether guns make “us” safer depend to some extent on whether the person asked, or someone else, has the weapon. Consider a fun survey experiment conducted in the mid-1990s. The first of two surveys asked whether “ordinary Americans” after “proper training” should be able to carry a gun on their person. In response, 65% of respondents said no. The second survey personalized the scenario by asking whether “average Americans, such as yourself” should be allowed to get a concealed-carry license “for self-protection.” Here the result flipped: 60% now were in support.¹⁵

As people move imaginatively in from concentric social circles farther away from them to closer ones, and then to themselves, they become more confident that guns will do them good. Defensive gun culture thrives on fear of those who are “other,” of course, but even if human beings were able to survey society without prejudice, it is almost a tautology that self-protection would remain a more proximate concern. No wonder Cook and Goss find that “the number-one reason for owning a firearm is personal security.”¹⁶

Here, then, is how the free-rider problem works in the context of gun ownership: let us stipulate gun owners who are well-trained and consistently safety-conscious in a way that protects their family from accidental discharge. *I* may not be convinced that gun owners will be safer in high-pressured crisis situations where they imagine using a

¹⁵ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 29. The footnote to this paragraph reads: “Tarrance Group and Mellman, Lazarus & Lake/US News & World Report, May 16–18, 1994 (1,000 telephone interviews of a national adult sample); Tarrance Group/American Firearms Council, July 21–23, 1996 (1,004 telephone interviews of a national sample of registered voters).”

¹⁶ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 29.

gun for protection, given the accelerating unpredictability intrinsic to those very situations—but *they* are convinced. At least within the narrowed parameters of these scenarios alone, Cook and Goss have reported that the statistical findings about actual outcomes are inconclusive.¹⁷ Even though something very visceral is inevitably part of the fearful scenario people are imagining,¹⁸ a decision for gun ownership cannot simply be dismissed as irrational.

Nonetheless, let us also stipulate that a portion of gun owners might be able to compartmentalize the visceral and be open to evidence showing that in the aggregate, the presence of so many guns in the United States leads to more violence *overall*. As a matter of public policy—in the aggregate, again—it is arguably rational to discourage, regulate, reduce, and even work to eliminate individual gun ownership someday. We are thus in a stand-off between competing rationalities. In a society in which the best we can hope for is reasonable regulation of guns, gun control advocates gain little by denying a certain rationality to gun ownership. The very disjunction between the rationality of gun control and the simultaneous rationality of gun ownership marks an instantiation of the free-rider problem. What is rational for a larger community or society as a whole may not be rational for an individual or limited group, and vice versa.

There are other names for this kind of challenge or problem or dilemma as noticed in different disciplines. We have already mentioned what political scientists and sociologists call “*the collective action problem*”—how to get individuals to work together for a solution that would benefit all, when each has incentives to hang back. Philosophers and environmentalists have noted “*the tragedy of the commons*” by which we actually make things worse and despoil the shared resources we need to live productive lives precisely as we pursue our self-interests. Ethicists make their students think through “*the prisoner’s dilemma*” in order to help them recognize how important though hard it is to identify what actually might be in our *enlightened self-interest* if only we could find a way to cooperate. Meanwhile, as climate change becomes increasingly ominous, the

¹⁷ Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 18–19.

¹⁸ Even an essay arguing for an ethic of nonviolence in situations of personal threat that would seem to call for violent self-defense recognizes this dimension: “This question ... is troubling precisely because of its personal specificity and because of the visceral reaction it evokes. You are present as one of your own loved ones is being attacked. And you are being asked to respond as you would, or as you hope that you would, in that moment of crisis. It carries within it so much particularity” (Amy Laura Hall and Kara Slade, “What Would You Do If Someone Were Attacking a Loved One?,” in *A Faith not Worth Fighting for: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Nonviolence*, ed. Tripp York and Justin Bronson Barringer [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012], 31).

free-rider problem itself seems to be getting increased attention at the juncture between economics and environmentalism. From small businesses to entire nations, there are perverse incentives to continue drawing on the shared resources of both natural and built environments while emitting carbon dioxide and other pollutants without paying for “externalities”—the costs of doing business that accrue to others without ever appearing on one’s own ledger. The challenge is that there seem to be insufficient incentives to clean up or change one’s own practices unless everyone else does so simultaneously. Free riders thus ride gamely on.

As one surveys these different but overlapping disciplines, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the free-rider problem as variously named may well be insoluble.¹⁹ The Nobel-winning economist Ronald Coase attempted to defend the strength and capacity of free markets by showing how they could account for externalities—avoiding one kind of free-riding—but his defense of what came to be known as the Coase Theorem relied on highly delimited cases involving only two parties.²⁰ Other economists debating the Coase Theorem eventually demonstrated why the free-rider problem resurfaces as soon as theorists introduce just one more party into their scenarios²¹—underscoring the difficulty of blocking out free-riders amid the boundless network of those who have any kind of stake in environmental degradation or the proliferation of gun ownership for self-defense, especially given unequal power.²² Garrett Hardin, who penned the famous essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” warning of environmental catastrophe due to population explosion, did offer possible solutions but they were so grim and coercive that the essay is most often remembered as a counsel of despair.²³ The so-called “prisoner’s dilemma” (in which either one of two prisoners in separate cells can go free if he alone betrays the other, but doesn’t know what the other is doing) has been a classic not only among game theorists but among ethicists and moral philosophers for over half a century

¹⁹ The field of Christian ethics seems mainly to have addressed the free-rider problem and its cognates indirectly. Note however the emerging work of Mary Nickel in her paper at the 2021 meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics entitled “Blessed Assurance: A Theological Ethics of Collective Action Problems.”

²⁰ R. H. Coase, “Problem of Social Cost,” *Journal of Law and Economics* 3 (October 1960): 1–44.

²¹ Tore Ellingsen and Elena Paltseva, “Confining the Coase Theorem: Contracting, Ownership, and Free-Riding,” *Review of Economic Studies* 83, no. 2 (April 2016): 547–586.

²² Stéphane Gonzalez, Alain Marciano, and Philippe Solal, “The Social Cost Problem, Rights, and the (Non)Empty Core,” *Journal of Public Economic Theory* 21, no. 2 (April 2019): 347–365.

²³ Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162 (13 December 1968): 1243–1248.

precisely because it allows no neat way to break through even to enlightened self-interest.

Sociologists and political scientists do keep working at ways to build up enough social capital or critical mass to break through to the other side of the collective action problem,²⁴ and some have traced how this has happened in other times and cultures.²⁵ American individualism certainly makes this harder insofar as it “undermines civic charity by reaping the benefits of civic relationships while denying any concomitant responsibilities,” as Christopher Jones and Conor Kelly noted, even as they held out hope that structural as well as cultural remedies could offset this free-riding tendency.²⁶ A mixed but in-this-regard-hopeful case study of social mobilization among poor white South Africans in a neighborhood of Cape Town suggests that at least on a local level it is possible to initiate collective action, building up trust and social capital even among strangers in a way that will make further collective action easier next time.²⁷ It may be a bug or a feature, but mobilization to break through the collective-action problem proved most viable locally. That is a clue to which I will return.

We are left to conclude that the free-rider problem and its cognates can never be eliminated wholesale. The best we may be able to hope for is to mitigate them. The question then is how, at what level, at which social locations, and by whom. Even if change is possible at the level of law and policy, there must be people to do the changing—people of a certain character and formation.

NOTHING SHORT OF CONVERSION?

²⁴ Michael W. Macy, “Learning Theory and the Logic of Critical Mass,” *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 6 (December 1990): 809–826; Michael Laver, “Political Solutions to the Collective Action Problem,” *Political Studies* 28, no. 2 (June 1980): 195–209.

²⁵ Dominic D. P. Johnson, “God’s Punishment and Public Goods,” *Human Nature* 16, no. 4 (December 2005): 410–446; Courtney Jung, “Breaking the Cycle: Producing Trust out of Thin Air and Resentment,” *Social Movement Studies* 2, no. 2 (October 2003): 147–175.

²⁶ Christopher D. Jones and Conor M. Kelly, “Sloth: America’s Ironic Structural Vice,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 117–134; quotation from 117.

²⁷ Jung, “Breaking the Cycle.” What makes this case study mixed is that there were some racial undercurrents in the mobilization it found possible. On the one hand, residents of the neighborhood mobilized to protest the bussing of hundreds of black students into their school. On the other hand, they had legitimate complaints that their school had been so underfunded and neglected that it could not host more students of any color. Jung also provides evidence that racial tensions, though present, were not a dominant factor: “Some mixed-race couples we interviewed claimed in fact that they had moved to Ruyterwacht because it was less racially hostile than other areas where they had lived” (154).

To recognize the challenge of gun-control as a free-rider problem hardly is original. Kristin Goss's *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America* is a sustained effort to chart ways to organize sufficient collective action to overcome it.²⁸ As the subtitle suggests, what prompted Goss's book was the paradox that has puzzled many—why there is no real movement for gun control in the United States even though a strong majority of Americans favor it.²⁹ The “traditional” or “textbook” answer is that while political support for gun control is widespread, it is also diffuse, whereas support for gun rights is intense and focused through one-issue voting.³⁰ But why is *that* the case? Goss wanted to go deeper. To answer she examined “an array of structural constraints, historical developments, and organizational choices,” in which the success of gun-control opponents' use of American federalism has been a through-line.³¹ Still, the divergent intensity on opposite sides of the gun debate itself reflects a free-rider disjunction, and the problem surfaces even as analysis moves from the passion that drives individual agency to the dynamics of movement organization. The National Rifle Association can offer its members both concrete benefits and focused lobbying that channels a deeply-felt sense of identity, while organizations advocating for gun control struggle to offer more than a generalized prospect of greater public safety.³² Naming this itself as a free-rider problem, Goss studied the success of other movements which “have found ways around that problem.”³³

Although the very goal of “securing a public good” leaves gun control “inherently vulnerable to the free-rider problem,” Goss held out hope that “the free-rider problem can be overcome under certain circumstances”³⁴ and explored how. Together, three core social-movement strategies might turn the free-rider problem inside out by distributing or “socializing” the costs of gun control individuals otherwise try to avoid, while bringing home, “personalizing,” or “individualizing” the otherwise diffuse and generalized social benefits of freedom from gun violence.³⁵ Citing historical examples from other

²⁸ For explicit discussions of free-rider dynamics see Kristin A. Goss, *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 26–28, 50, 60, 108, 174, 190–191.

²⁹ Goss, *Disarmed*, 3.

³⁰ Goss, *Disarmed*, 6–7.

³¹ Goss, *Disarmed*, 3.

³² This is my own summary of points in Goss, *Disarmed*, 90–91.

³³ Goss, *Disarmed*, 91.

³⁴ Goss, *Disarmed*, 50, 27.

³⁵ Goss, *Disarmed*, 108. For additional summaries of this overarching strategic principle of reversal, see also 50–51; 72. The three subsidiary strategies are: (1) “Socializing the costs of participation” (51–60, further developed in chapter 3); (2) “Personalizing the

social movements, Goss argued that gun-control advocates should (1) *socialize the costs of participation* by attaining the patronage of larger institutions (philanthropic or even governmental); (2) *personalize the benefits of participation* by identifying “compelling, actionable self-interest” that shows sympathizers what they will have to gain through greater movement participation; and (3) *boost the participation payoff* by aiming for incremental, achievable localized policy wins that cement participants’ sense of empowerment and personal identity. As a result, “individuals can see a benefit to participating in social reform and recognize the cost of doing nothing. When issues are so personalized, intensity rises. Even though free-rider problems are still present, they are greatly reduced.”³⁶

Goss did not characterize this flipping of the logic of free-riding as “conversion,” religious or otherwise. The obvious reason is that she is a social scientist who uses the terminology of her discipline. One might also anticipate that such language—like a certain kind of disempowering Evangelical discourse—implies that there is no use working for social justice without transforming individual hearts through personal salvation. Making a sustained argument against centralized, top-down approaches to political changes and in favor of “modest measures” achievable through “incrementalism,”³⁷ her contention was still about how to achieve legislative and policy change, not to distract from them as goals. Along the way she drew both on examples of other movements in US history that have had some measure of success at “champion[ing] policy proposals that would regulate individual behavior and hence restrict liberty,”³⁸ and sociological analysis of social movement dynamics. Since the free-rider problem names a stand-off between individual self-interest and collective goods (or at least enlightened self-interest), Goss’s strategies necessarily pivoted around shifts in decisions and agency by individual citizens, who must come to identify more intensely with the gun-control cause and join, and then participate energetically, in voluntary organizations if there is to be a social movement at all.

In a sense, one should hardly need to argue that gun-control advocates ought to put the theme of conversion on the table: gun enthusiasts have already done so. James Atwood, a Presbyterian pastor who is both a hunter and a gun-control activist, has described much of the work of the National Rifle Association and gun manufacturers as

benefits of participation” (60–65, further developed in chapter 4); and (3) “Boosting the participation payoff” (65–72, further developed in chapter 5).

³⁶ Goss, *Disarmed*, 127.

³⁷ Goss, *Disarmed*, 145–189.

³⁸ Goss, *Disarmed*, 51.

“vigorous evangelizing.”³⁹ To the degree that gun ownership has arguably taken on religious dimensions, such terminology becomes simple description, not metaphor. Atwood has not shied away from proposing that for at least some in the United States, guns have become idols.⁴⁰ For a Christian minister or theologian, “idolatry” can have a precise and technical meaning. For believers in *any* of the three Abrahamic traditions, trust that some competitor to God will secure our lives is precisely what constitutes idolatry. Catholic Bishop Michael William Warfel illustrated how this works when he told of a woman who hesitated to be baptized because she heard parishioners speaking in favor of gun control:

She was speaking of the Second Amendment as if it were the second commandment of the Decalogue from the Bible. She had elevated the Bill of Rights to the level of a holiness code. For her, the right to own and bear arms, and to do so with minimal limitations, were God-given rights and therefore sacred.⁴¹

Though it is tempting—and for some people accurate—to describe gun ownership as “a religion” in and of itself, it is analytically safer to see it as a cross-cutting religious phenomenon or movement (by analogy, in a class more like Fundamentalism, the Charismatic Movement, or an ancient heresy rather than constituting a denomination or religion *per se*). Atwood has offered the provocative term “Gundamentalism” as a way to name the quasi-theological and mystical belief in the power of guns.⁴²

Social scientists may want to be more cautious and precise, but clearly the right to own and use firearms to protect oneself and one’s family has for many become an article of faith alongside other beliefs. With the help of a qualitative study conducted in northeastern Kansas, Abigail Vegter and Margaret Kelley have shown how beliefs about guns can correlate with a cluster of other beliefs about the supernatural character of evil, Armageddon, Hell, and the demonic.⁴³ Another correlative set of beliefs defines what sociologists Andrew Whitehead

³⁹ James E. Atwood, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Exposé* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 203.

⁴⁰ Atwood, *America and Its Guns*, 19–21. Also note the titles to chapters 3, and 9–13.

⁴¹ Michael William Warfel, “Why Gun Control?,” *America* 182 (15 April 2000): 18.

⁴² In addition to *America and Its Guns*, see James E. Atwood, *Collateral Damage: Changing the Conversation about Firearms and Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2019) and James E. Atwood and Jan Orr-Harter, *Gundamentalism and Where It is Taking America*, including discussion questions by Jan Orr-Harter (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

⁴³ Abigail Vegter and Margaret Kelley, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Gun Ownership,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 3 (September 2020): 526–540.

and Samuel Perry have called “Christian nationalism”—“a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems ... that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”⁴⁴ In Whitehead and Perry’s analysis, Christian nationalism overlaps with but is distinguishable from white Evangelicalism.⁴⁵ Christian nationalists are “least likely to support federal gun control legislation,” while “those who attend church more often, pray more often, or read their Bible more frequently are more likely to support gun control.”⁴⁶

One lesson moral theologians can draw from Whitehead and Perry, then, is that conversion, formation, and transformation really do make a difference. The question is whether gun-control advocates and other progressives will recover an appetite for framing their message as a call to conversion away from faith in the power of guns. Whitehead, Perry, or Goss cannot be expected to talk and frame the issue in religious terms. As theologians, I and other contributors to this issue should put aside any such scruples.

To be sure, the pull of those scruples is unmistakable. Martin Marty—for many decades one of the most prolific representatives of mainstream Protestantism in the United States—has noted that even thinkers who try to distinguish coercive and disrespectful “proselytism” from responsible and dialogical efforts at “conversion” have to exercise great care. For they are deeply aware

that in the present-day cultures in which most readers of this book reside, the sound of the word has pejorative overtones and undertones. In these cultures it is ordinarily not considered good to proselytize. Those who speak positively about doing so on any scale have to know that they are inviting complex criticism or even simple dismissal.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

⁴⁵ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, x, 20–21, 84–87. On page 153 they add: “Christian nationalism is significant because calls to ‘take America back for God’ are not primarily about mobilizing the faithful toward religious ends. Some social scientists have argued that when Evangelicals appeal to the religious heritage of the United States or work toward privileging Christianity in the public sphere they are focused on encouraging greater religious devotion. We disagree. They are instead seeking to retain or gain power in the public sphere—whether political, social, or religious. Christian nationalism is, therefore, ultimately about privilege. It co-opts Christian language and iconography in order to cloak particular political or social ends in moral and religious symbolism.”

⁴⁶ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 155.

⁴⁷ Martin E. Marty, “Proselytizers and Proselytizees on the Sharp Arete of Modernity,” in *Sharing the Book: Religious Perspectives on the Rights and Wrongs of Proselytism*, ed. John Witte, Jr. and Richard C. Martin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 2.

The intellectual atmosphere of post-Enlightenment modernity gives general reasons for this caution, which Marty went on to list: the modern celebration of freedom and autonomy, the requirements of pluralism, sensitivity about the insecure identities that come along with freedom and pluralism, and an ensuing struggle between relativism and potentially violent absolutisms.⁴⁸ Post-Conquest, post-Holocaust, and post-colonialization, the legacy of centuries of efforts to force conversion means that violence is no mere specter; in ecumenical circles, the Holocaust and the centuries of Christian anti-Semitism that prepared for it serve as a regular reminder.⁴⁹

A glance across the ocean might serve to remind those anxious about rhetorics of conversion to beware of what they wish for, lest protestation against proselytism serve to insulate nationalism from critique. Since 1989, efforts to distinguish proper evangelism from proselytism have become especially heated in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, where Orthodox churches protest the incursion of Evangelical and Pentecostal groups from the West. The threat these groups represent is not only to the ecclesiological turf of older churches but to the cohesion of national identities for which Orthodoxy has claimed to be the glue.⁵⁰ Whether such protestation is legitimate and when⁵¹ probably depends on how one evaluates specific forms of patriotism, nationalism, and efforts to preserve a specific cohesion that has historically relied on religion. The point here is not to discredit legitimate concerns of Eastern Orthodox leaders, but to issue a reality check back on the American side of the Atlantic. At a time when many are sounding warnings not only about Christian

⁴⁸ Marty, "Proselytizers and Proselytizees," 2–3.

⁴⁹ See Marc H. Tanenbaum, Marvin R. Wilson, and A. James Rudin, eds., *Evangelicals and Jews in an Age of Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984); John Witte, Jr. and Richard C. Martin, eds., *Sharing the Book: Religious Perspectives on the Rights and Wrongs of Proselytism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

⁵⁰ See John Witte, Jr. and Michael Bourdeaux, *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Miroslav Volf, "Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: Mission and Proselytism in Eastern Europe," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 1 (January 1996): 26–31; Darrell Richard Jackson, "Proselytism in a Central and Eastern European Perspective," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 2008): 18–36; Tim Noble, "Proselytism and the Ethics of Mission," *Acta Missiologiae* 6 (2018): 47–63.

⁵¹ As Tim Noble has noted, "In practice, the debate is hard to even get started. I presume that just about everyone will agree that it is wrong to tell lies, to manipulate or to use psychological, physical or social force to persuade people to change their religious confession. That is not the problem. The problem is, as so often, with how we name what we see. In English the verb seems to be conjugated 'I evangelise, you proselytise'" (Noble, "Proselytism and the Ethics of Mission," 56).

nationalism but also more extreme forms of white nationalism, gun-control advocates who join them are already distinguishing among and critiquing at least some forms of nationalism. Not all US gun owners are nationalists, of course, much less white nationalists, but protecting the Second Amendment is a particularly impassioned tenet that unites disparate movements and helps them recruit regular gun owners to their cause.⁵² When “God, guns, and country” falls easily off the tongue and onto the placard, one kind of conversion has already been happening for a long time. To counter it, progressives may need preachers more than they need policy wonks.

To point out the many ways guns already constitute a religious issue might seem akin to “whataboutism”—the fallacious rhetorical tactic of deflecting criticism of one’s own position or practice by claiming that one’s opponents are doing the same. Kristen Goss’s *Disarmed* makes clear why more than that is going on. Identity issues are a thread running throughout her analysis of social movements and strategic proposals. No social movement can be effective unless otherwise disaffected individuals come to recognize themselves as part of a group and begin to act collectively; agency comes by way of identity, Goss has observed.⁵³ Two of her three top-level strategies thus aim to personalize general social benefits, and then deepen and intensify those persons’ participation.⁵⁴ The process addresses values as it moves people to define their identity according to “purposive benefits” that “appeal to people’s sense of altruism.”⁵⁵ After all,

to understand mass mobilization we must first understand what causes people to care enough to overcome the natural free-rider impulse. Economic interest is one answer but many of the most salient policy debates in America revolve around noneconomic considerations such as identity, justice, morality, or security.⁵⁶

For activists on the ground, the key to all this is “reframing” the gun issue in order to change the scope of individuals’ assessment of their interests: “What frames do is legitimize the involvement of

⁵² Evidence here must probably be journalistic. For such evidence see, for example, Mike Giglio, “‘Civil War is Here, Right Now’: The President’s Supporters on the Militant Right Are Bracing for Conflict,” *The Atlantic* 326, no. 4 (November 2020): 68–69.

⁵³ Goss, *Disarmed*, 32. See also her further elaboration of this point on page 116, and her comments on page 33 on how leaders of the Civil Rights Movement drew upon “black group identity forged through centuries of repression and group agency,” expressed and solidified through “historically black colleges and churches” that provided “volunteers, money, leadership, and other movement resources.”

⁵⁴ Goss, *Disarmed*, 60–72.

⁵⁵ Goss, *Disarmed*, 57.

⁵⁶ Goss, *Disarmed*, 60.

interested individuals by creating a ‘we.’ Thus, effective frames expand the scope of conflict by linking personal identity to collective action.”⁵⁷

Even if we are talking about shifts and transformations of identity on the purely secular terms of social science, then, we are talking about some kind of “conversion.” As we have seen, Goss’s social movement strategies together aim to turn the free-rider problem inside out by “socializing” the costs of gun control while “personalizing” its otherwise diffuse or aggregate social benefits. My own point is this: insofar as the free-rider problem represents a stand-off between competing rationalities, more than reason is needed to jump from limited to enlightened self-interest—to say nothing of crossing the threshold to altruism and a generalized concern for the common good. It would thus be foolish and short-sighted for those working for freedom from gun violence to be too chary or polite that they keep the need for conversion off the table.

JUST-PEACE ETHICS AS AN OFFER OF “GOOD NEWS”

Additional objections to this claim may linger. One such objection might be that Evangelicalism has so entrapped and impoverished the language of conversion as to render it irretrievable. Closely related, another might be that even if retrievable—as available in the common heritage of Christianity—the language of conversion is intrinsically too individualistic to be helpful for social policy. Third, for moral theology to speak to social policy in a pluralistic society requires argumentation that appeals to non-particularized reasons and motivations, such that religious overtones in the word “conversion” could prove distracting. Finally, even if all of these objections are met—a skeptic might say—to affect public policy would require not just conversion but many conversions and indeed mass conversion, so that if mass conversion is our only hope our situation may indeed be hopeless.

Some of these objections can be met with brief historical reminders. Not only does Evangelicalism not hold a trademark on “conversion” but the tradition and historical precursors that prepared for its emergence in the twentieth century have played a greater role in liberative social movements than its contemporary reputation would allow.⁵⁸ The questions of how much hope we dare place in conversion,

⁵⁷ Goss, *Disarmed*, 107.

⁵⁸ See Donald W. Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice*, with Douglas M. Strong, foreword by Jim Wallis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). Adjacent both in issues and tradition is the work of Paul Alexander on Pentecostalism and peace witness: *Peace to War: Shifting Allegiances in the Assemblies of God*, foreword by Glen Stassen

however, and whether its religious overtones are necessarily distracting, hinge on what we envision when we hear the term.

As long as believers heed the insistence of Pope Paul VI that they must *propose* not *impose* their message,⁵⁹ then putting conversion back on the table could certainly involve preaching, apologetics, or outright evangelism—but this is secondary. What is crucial is the shape of the gospel being proclaimed, and whether it invites transformation to the fullness of love for God *and love for neighbor as oneself*. This is a love that curves not in on itself but outward in the expectation that the self will find fulfillment only through reconciled relationships that reach out even to enemies. Differing theories of atonement in the Christian tradition may set the stage for such proclamation with lesser or greater clarity. In a way, however, any conception of atonement will do, so long as it recognizes God's gracious initiative and expects our response to issue in active gratitude.⁶⁰ It is altogether biblical and orthodox to insist that however forgiveness happens, the only rightful response by us who once made ourselves God's enemies through sin (Romans 5:8–10) is to reciprocate gratefully with a corresponding grace toward others, even our enemies. This is the lesson of the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant in Matthew 18:23–32. And then, to those with ears to hear and eyes to see, a whole new, wholly creative dynamic is being released into the world—thus revealing a new world for those “in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17), and with it a new worldview: *God's grace. Our gratitude. Issuing in graciousness toward others*. The unfurling of grace corresponds to the furling of fear.

“Who's on first?” is an old comedy routine by Abbott and Costello but also an ancient and deadly serious question for humanity. Who will make the first move to break the vicious cycles that ensnare us in accelerating patterns of violence? Christians believe—or at least claim to believe—that in Jesus Christ, none less than the God who created the universe has reached out first, taken the initiative, the ultimate risk,

(Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2009); *Pentecostals and Nonviolence: Reclaiming a Heritage*, foreword by Stanley Hauerwas (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012).

⁵⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [*Evangelization in the Modern World*], apostolic letter (1975), no. 80.

⁶⁰ While my argument here does not require choosing among the several Christian theories of atonement, I do expect that the most adequate would reflect insights akin to those of René Girard. I refer especially to the way the French literary critic and philosopher connected the death of Jesus as innocent victim to patterns of mimesis and the breaking of cycles of violence and injustice not only in the biblical drama but through the arch of history. For a helpful introduction to Girard's wide-ranging and visionary work see Rowan Williams, “Foreword,” in *Can We Survive Our Origins?: Readings in René Girard's Theory of Violence and the Sacred*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), xi–xvi.

and broken humanity's cycle of recriminating, mimetic, self-protecting violence. To respond violently even when one does so with just cause may fuel vicious cycles by inflicting new injustices and inviting recrimination. The *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Jesus Christ that the hymn embedded in Philippians 2 charts is God's decisive inversion of the free-rider problem. And it should also be ours. To identify through any kind of gratitude with the faith or logic or aesthetic of this drama is—in the vision of Saint Paul—to start becoming “of the same mind,” looking increasingly to the interests of others and not just one's own self-interest (Phil 2:2–5). That means I might be the one called to risk being the next to “go first”—do the unexpected for the sake of others. With that, *behold, a new creation!* Those who accept the reconciliation “all” from God are drawn into God's own ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17–20). The Jesus of St. Paul or of the Creed is not different from the Jesus of the Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount; my “personal salvation” is wholly of a piece with the salvation of the world. To recognize the dynamic power of “going first” that stretches from the cosmic to the salvation-historical to the daily personal is key to keeping Jesus our Savior theologically indivisible from Jesus our Lord and Teacher; it highlights the ethical import in naming him none less than the second person of the Trinity and provides the ultimate grounding—both biblical and metaphysical—for a just-peace ethic.

Nomenclature has varied somewhat as a “just-peace ethic” has developed in continuity with the “just-peacemaking theory” the late Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen and others have championed, while benefiting from the maturing field of peace studies and an increasingly professional field of strategic peacebuilding.⁶¹ Calls for a just-peace ethic have gained new attention thanks to an “Appeal to the Catholic Church to Recommit to Gospel Nonviolence” at a meeting in Rome in April 2016 organized by Pax Christi International and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace,⁶² but also from mainstream Protestant

⁶¹ Eli S. McCarthy, ed., *A Just Peace Ethic Primer: Building Sustainable Peace and Breaking Cycles of Violence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020); Glen H. Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, 3rd edition (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2008); Daniel Philpott and Gerard F. Powers, eds., *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a summary of just-peace norms, criteria, and practices, see Gerald W. Schlabach, “What is ‘Just Peace’?,” March 2, 2018, www.geraldschlabach.net/2018/03/02/what-is-just-peace.

⁶² Pax Christi International, “An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence,” final document of the conference “Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence,” hosted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in Rome, April 2016, nonviolencejustpeace.net/appeal-to-the-catholic-church. For an account of the development of this initiative, see Marie Dennis, ed., *Choosing Peace: The Catholic*

efforts in recent decades to break through the centuries-old impasse between pacifist and just-war traditions in order to reach a new consensus,⁶³ as well as from ecumenical dialogue between paradigmatic representatives of those traditions—Mennonites on the historic peace church side, and Roman Catholics delegated by the Vatican.⁶⁴

What has driven much of this decades-long initiative and shaped the emerging just-peace ethic is—as the name implies—the hope for a synthesis or Hegelian *Aufhebung* that simultaneously transcends yet preserves the best of both elements.⁶⁵ Whatever the terminology, the work of just peacebuilding seeks to hold on to the best-intentioned end of just-war tradition—achieving the most effective justice realistically possible in this fallen world—while also holding on to the moral vision of pacifist traditions by insisting that means to the end of justice must themselves be just, specifically as they respect the dignity of all by avoiding new harms. If such a synthesis can realign means and ends in what Eli McCarthy has called the principle or norm of “reflexivity,”⁶⁶ then the limitations and dangers of both just-war and

Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018). For a fuller and more seasoned articulation of the implications of the 2016 appeal, see Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, *Advancing Nonviolence and Integral Peace in the Church and the World: Biblical, Theological, Ethical, Pastoral, and Strategic Dimensions of Nonviolence*, ed. Rose Marie Berger, Ken Butigan, Judy Coode, and Marie Dennis (Brussels: Pax Christi International, 2020).

⁶³ World Council of Churches, *Overcoming Violence: The Ecumenical Decade 2001–2010* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2011), www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/OvercomingViolence.pdf; World Council of Churches, *An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace*, received, endorsed, and commended for study, reflection, collaboration, and common action during the Central Committee meetings in February 2011 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2011), www.overcomingviolence.org/en/resources-dov/wcc-resources/documents/declarations-on-just-peace/ecumenical-call-to-just-peace.html.

⁶⁴ Mennonite World Conference and Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity, “Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998–2003,” *Information Service* 2003-II/III, no. 113 (2004): 111–148, www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/conferenza-mennonita-mondiale/documenti-di-dialogo/2003-called-together-to-be-peacemakers-/en.html; Mennonite World Conference and Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity, “A Mennonite and Catholic Contribution to the World Council of Churches’ *Decade to Overcome Violence*,” Report from Mennonite–Catholic Conference, Rome, 23–25 October 2007 (2007), www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/Mennonite_and_Catholic_contribution_to_DOV.pdf.

⁶⁵ The best way to understand the difficult German word “*Aufhebung*” in the Hegelian sense but also as used by theologian Karl Barth, is to compare it to the process of pickling. A cucumber that has become a pickle has been destroyed *qua* cucumber, yet preserved.

⁶⁶ McCarthy, *A Just Peace Ethic Primer*, 67–68, drawing upon Jarem Sawatsky, *Justpeace Ethics: A Guide to Restorative Justice and Peacebuilding*, foreword by Howard Zehr (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 12–15.

pacifist approaches might be left behind even while preserving their insights and aspirations.

Though Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) has long been an arena of contention between historic peace churches and just-war affirming churches, fresh exegesis has in fact shifted the debate and reinforced new insights into the contemporary dynamics of just peacemaking. The tireless work of Glen Stassen is evident on both counts.⁶⁷ In the wake of the 1989 Revolution that peacefully brought down the Iron Curtain, Stassen led a group of Christian ethicists and political scientists from both just-war and peace-church traditions in studying what really—realistically—had led to the long-unimaginable end of the Cold War between the Soviet bloc and the alliance of Western countries. The group identified ten “normative practices” for just peacemaking that ethicists from both traditions could agree upon even if they did so out of somewhat different starting principles. Simultaneously, Stassen was reexamining the Sermon on the Mount, convincing New Testament scholars of the validity of his exegesis, and showing that Jesus's ethic was not mere idealism, but practicable and politically potent.⁶⁸ The pattern he discerned in the Sermon on the Mount lay just under the surface when the just-peacemaking working group published the first edition of its findings in 1998.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ I provide footnotes to the most important books and articles by Stassen and others but the reader may also want to consult my own summaries both of Stassen's exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount and how it plays out in the contemporary “transforming initiatives” of just peacemaking theory. See Gerald W. Schlabbach, “A ‘Manual’ for Escaping Our Vicious Cycles: The Political Relevance of Enemy-Love,” *Modern Theology* 36, no. 3 (July 2020): 478–500; chapters 8–9 of *A Pilgrim People: Becoming a Catholic Peace Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), 236–294; or the shorter preliminary installment of this work in this journal: “A ‘Manual’ for Escaping Our Vicious Cycles,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 2 (June 2018): 86–91.

⁶⁸ For a detailed presentation of Stassen's exegesis aimed at an audience of New Testament scholars, see Glen H. Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–7:12),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 267–308. For a more pedagogically accessible version aimed at a popular audience, see Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006). For related resources see Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Glen H. Stassen, “The Sermon on the Mount as Realistic Disclosure of Solid Ground,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 1 (2009): 57–75; and chapters 10–11 of Glen H. Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

⁶⁹ First published as *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*, the subtitle for the second and third editions has been more circumspect. See Glen H. Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, 3rd ed. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2008). Stassen was already laying the basis for this

What simultaneously discloses the practicability of Jesus's teachings and propels the peacemaking in a just-peace ethic are what Stassen called "transforming initiatives"—actions and practices that "go first" by acting in unanticipated ways, thus changing power dynamics and social configurations amid oppression or potentially violent conflict. For centuries, biblical interpreters had jumped to conclusions when Jesus repeatedly taught, "You have heard it said ... but I say unto you" in Matthew 5, assuming that Jesus's teachings only had two parts—first naming the inadequacy of traditional morality derived from the Old Testament, then setting the high bar of God's true and perfectly loving ideals. This left some Christians striving for unattainable moral perfection and others despairing as they turned elsewhere for moral guidance and political effectiveness in the face of humanity's most intractable moral dilemmas. Through careful literary analysis that might look almost abstruse at first—but that issues in sharp social insight—Stassen showed the heart of the Sermon on the Mount to be organized around a series of triads, not dyads or binaries. The upshot is that what exegetes and preachers alike had long called Jesus's "hard sayings"—and implicitly or explicitly dismissed as such—are not the focus in Jesus's teachings, nor high-bar standards, but interim diagnoses of why "traditional righteousness" never seems to liberate us from our vicious cycles. The climax of each teaching comes in a third part that points to the practical liberation we need.

Consistently, Jesus's moral imperatives in the third part of each respective teaching in Matthew 5–7⁷⁰ offer creativity and hope. In the passage often interpreted to mean "Don't ever get angry!" (Matthew 5:21–26), for example, the real lesson is to be quick to seek out reconciliation. Part 1 names the *traditional righteousness*—don't murder. Part 2 *diagnoses the vicious cycles* by which angry accusatory words provoke more in return and invite community judgment for doing the same thing one is accusing others of. Part 3 then offers guidance that is at once grace-filled, practical, and imperative—a *transforming initiative* to lay aside pride and even piety to reach out "first" through gestures that heal relationships. This is the threefold pattern throughout the entire series of fourteen teachings in the Sermon. Coinciding with the work of biblical scholars Clarence

integration of exegesis and ethics in *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

⁷⁰ More precisely, in the long middle section that stretches from Matthew 5:17 through 7:12.

Jordan⁷¹ and Walter Wink,⁷² Stassen showed that the key paragraphs at the end of Matthew 5 on retaliation and love of enemies are also practicable in ways mainstream Christian traditions have long missed or dismissed. Translating the Greek in Matthew 5:39 more carefully, we see that Jesus does not say never to resist evil (which hardly squares with other biblical injunctions anyway) but rather, “not to retaliate revengefully by evil means.”⁷³ Examined closely and in historical context, to turn the other cheek, give up one’s cloak as well as one’s coat, and go the second mile all emerge as paradigmatic strategies of nonviolent direct action that turn the tables on oppressors and equalize social power. They are transforming initiatives that break out of vicious cycles by responding to violence and injustice—but not in kind.

They not only resist the temptation to free ride; they begin to reverse the sociology of free riding. They resolve to act first, at risk to oneself, for the good of the whole. But that starts to make it imaginable for less heroic actors to act in similar ways. The point is not to approach gun owners nicely in order to convince them to change their minds—though patient dialogue should certainly be part of the practice of active nonviolence. Rather, the point is to begin by demonstrating the courage to renounce recourse to violence oneself, individually and as Christian communities, and practice in public the skills of nonviolent accompaniment, active listening, and trust-building that exhibit alternative forms of security. As more people do so, they change permission and support structures; they gather a critical mass and make a movement possible. Vis-à-vis gun ownership for the purpose of self-protection despite the aggregate dangers that come when more and more people own guns, therefore, a just-peace ethic offers at least three responses or layers to one integrated response to defensive gun culture:

1. As already noted, it is worth examining the assumption that readily accessible guns will actually serve the purpose of self-protection well, even in the fearful scenario being imagined. As Eli McCarthy has insisted, a just-peace ethic will be a virtue ethic. That is, it expects to open up new and creative ways to respond to difficult moral situations by beginning sooner rather than later to develop the skillsets, virtues, moral motor skills, and community support that prepare moral agents to improvise well when a crisis comes. To be as

⁷¹ Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons* (New York: Association Press, 1972), 69, cited by Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads,” 281.

⁷² Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 175–194; Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 98–111.

⁷³ Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 91.

responsible as they claim to be, gun owners must invest hours upon hours at gun clubs learning safety and marksmanship. So if someone does have a legitimate fear of some kind of violent intruder (say because they live in an isolated rural area or an area that truly is a conflict zone), it is not too much to ask that we (first) and others (in turn) spend a comparable amount of time training in nonviolent direct action, bystander protection, and crisis response in order to hone the reflexes for creative responses to danger that depend on social not physical force. To do so might not just make society safer in the aggregate, but actually for everyone on the scene.

2. Note that none of this requires discounting the legitimacy of personal self-defense. A just-peace ethic will not deny just causes and ends, but rather will say “Yes, and ...” by holding out for nonviolent means both because they are right and because they are effective. Once we follow Stassen in recognizing the dynamic of transforming initiatives in Jesus’s ethic we can, like him and his colleagues in the just-peacemaking project, begin to see them at work in the realism of contemporary affairs. Though just-peacemaking theory has focused on social and political conflict, others have gathered examples of creative responses to personal threats that have defused violence nonviolently.⁷⁴ The point is not that anecdotal evidence from either side is adequate, but that accounts of nonviolent and nonlethal defusing of threat will help pique, then form, the imagination that is one of the resources upon which the practices of active nonviolence depend.

3. Can a nonviolence trainer or just-peace ethicist promise success every time? No, but neither can gun vendors. The Christian tradition, which sees power in suffering and even martyrdom, should be altering a Christian’s calculation of risk, if not the very definition of what constitutes a salient risk. Since we are anticipating how to bring cultural and legal change to a society that cannot be expected to share the worldview of committed Christian disciples, we may do well to bracket these variables. What a frank acknowledgement of risks on all sides should finally open up is a reasoned conversation about aggregates and free-riding exceptions, short-term safety and long-term security, narrow and enlightened self-interest. Simply to have such a conversation will have begun to neutralize the free-rider problem.

⁷⁴ See part three of John Howard Yoder, *What Would You Do?: A Serious Answer to a Standard Question*, expanded ed., with Joan Baez, Tom Skinner, Leo Tolstoy, and others (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1992). I have not made use of Yoder’s own title essay in this book in the present article because the record of Yoder’s theologically rationalized sexual abuse will require the work of at least a generation of feminist scholars to determine what can be retrieved from Yoder’s thought. The collection of essays and accounts he gathered from others in parts 2 and 3 of *What Would You Do?*, however, remains a valuable resource.

CONCLUSION

Those who claim to be “in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17), coming to share the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:1–5), and thus inviting God’s conversion—whether sudden or lifelong or both—are not the only ones who can be changed. *Vicious* cycles can spiral out of control, but *virtuous* cycles spiral outward too, in opposite directions. The “going first” Christians see God doing in Jesus Christ is but the climax to the plot of salvation history discernible already in the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3). The context of Abraham’s calling is the downward spiral of humanity as a whole in Genesis 1–11, which God seeks to reverse. When God chooses and calls out one particular family, God has not given up on “all the families of the earth,” but rather God has discovered the only social change strategy that ever seems to work—to move outward from the particular to the whole through the blessing that defines an identity that cannot be hoarded. The blessed are to become a blessing to other families and ultimately all the families of the earth or they are not who they were called and claim to be. The grammar of this exquisite paradox plays itself out throughout the biblical drama and in church history.⁷⁵

While the very nature of my thesis has required that I not shy away from using quite Christian language in the previous section, the argument does not require sectarian retreat, nor does it give up hope of social transformation. Other faiths and secular movements are altogether welcome to learn, perhaps be inspired, mine their own traditions and sacred texts for the resources to transform the self-interested into the benevolent, to begin inverting the logic of the free-rider problem, and so encourage the collective action needed to build a movement for freedom from gun violence. The lessons here apply to all movement organizers, regardless of religious affiliation. The “Abrahamic” model of social transformation affirms the kind of local grassroots work Kristin Goss implicitly and explicitly advocated in *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America* in order to supply the missing movement: local work is never lost, for indeed, local incremental change is often the key to empowering the people needed for widening social movements. The insight of just-peace ethics into the power of “going first,” wherever we are, should remind Christian activists that we dare not skip past our own local communities and churches.

That is arguably true at all times and for all social issues, but it is especially and obviously true when some of the strongest opponents of gun control claim to be fellow Christians. I would think that even quite secular gun-control advocates would welcome encouragement

⁷⁵ For a thorough exposition of the claims in this paragraph, see chapter 3 of Schlabach, *A Pilgrim People*, 133–161.

for Christians to recognize that the gospel we claim to proclaim matters and is not something to set aside in working for social justice and violence prevention. As part of this effort, the discipline of theology can contribute to that work by clarifying the gospel—exposing nationalistic and idolatrous accretions and helping strip them away. As a Christian believer and a theologian, it is hardly surprising that I believe that attending to how Christian faith communities articulate and live out the gospel can further rather than postpone work for the common good in partnership with others. At a time and place when the idolatry of trust in guns for security has taken so many captive under the banner of “God, guns, and country,” this should be especially manifest. The work of fraternal correction Christians need to do among themselves may be the single most important thing we can do for the social order. As Pope Paul VI noted in his apostolic exhortation on evangelization, sometimes Christians themselves must be the first to be converted.⁷⁶ **M**

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76. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nos. 15 and 21.