Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 12, Special Issue 2 (2023): 1–8

Moral Theology and Guns in the United States: Staging an Encounter

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GUNS HOLD A VEXINGLY UNIQUE PLACE IN THE UNITED STATES. The US has, by far, the highest prevalence of private firearm ownership among high-income nations in the world. Current estimates place the number of guns in private hands between 350 and 400 million.[1] The United States also has the highest prevalence of firearm-caused death among high-income nations, enduring from 2016 to 2019 an average of forty thousand firearm-caused deaths per year.[2] Over 2020 and 2021, this number has begun to approach the 50,000 mark.[3] Further, the polarization that marks public discourse on guns shows no signs of easing despite the tragic recurrence of mass shootings in contexts formerly considered immune to such violence, from school classrooms to houses of worship and beyond.[4]

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[1] For the lower estimate, see Jennifer Mascia and Chip Brownlee, "How Many Guns Are Circulating in the US?," *The Trace*, updated August 28, 2023, originally published March 6, 2023, www.thetrace.org/2023/03/guns-america-data-atf-total/. For the higher estimate, see Small Arms Survey, "Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers," June 2018, www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf, 4. Mascia and Brownlee discuss the challenges of developing an accurate estimate given that there is no national firearm registry in the United States. See also Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss, *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2–4.

[2] See "Firearm Deaths in the US: Statistics and Trends," *USAFacts*, accessed September 10, 2023, www.usafacts.org/data/topics/security-safety/crime-and-justice/firearms/firearm-deaths/, which draws from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

[3] *USAFacts* reports 45,222 firearm-caused deaths in 2020, and 48,830 firearm-caused deaths in 2021. See "Firearm Deaths in the US," *USAFacts*. For an analysis of 2021 firearm-caused death data, see John Gramlich, "What the Data Says about Gun Deaths in the US," Pew Research Center, April 26, 2023, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/26/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/. Provisional CDC data indicates that gun deaths decreased in 2022 compared to 2021. See Jennifer Mascia, "Gun Deaths Dropped Slightly in 2022—But Were Still High," *The Trace*, July 10, 2023, www.thetrace.org/2023/07/gun-deaths-cdc-data-suicide-homicide/.

[4] An April 2021 Pew Research Center poll found that partisan divisions on most gun policy proposals "have grown wider over the last few years," including "even

Given this, it is no wonder that scholars are increasingly turning their attention to guns. For decades, analyses of guns and their effects in the United States have largely been carried out in the fields of criminology and public health via quantitative modes of analysis.[5] Unsurprisingly, such approaches have failed to account holistically for the social and cultural reasons for firearm prevalence in the United States. Contemporary approaches to gun scholarship, particularly in the domains of sociology and cultural studies, have made significant inroads into correcting this trend. Often interdisciplinary in nature, this research has improved our ability to articulate why guns remain an entrenched feature of our social landscape, showing that guns do not exist abstractly but are incorporated into particular forms of life;[6] that "American gun culture" is not a monolithic entity but is composed of various subcultures that have evolved over time;[7] that guns are not

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on whether gun violence is a serious national problem" (Carroll Doherty, Jocelyn Kiley, Nida Asheer, and Calvin Jordan, "Amid a Series of Mass Shootings in the US, Gun Policy Remains Deeply Divisive," Pew Research Center, April 2021, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/04/20/amid-a-series-of-mass-shootings-in-the-u-s-gun-policy-remains-deeply-divisive/). See also Harry Enten, "The US Has Never Been So Polarized on Guns," *FiveThirtyEight*, October 4, 2017, fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-u-s-has-never-been-so-polarized-on-guns/, which cites 2017 Pew Research Center data much to the same effect. On school shootings, see John Woodrow Cox, Steven Rich, Linda Chong et al., "More than 356,000 students have experienced gun violence at school since Columbine," *The Washington Post*, updated June 11, 2023, originally published April 20, 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/education/interactive/school-shootings-database/. For a journalistic overview of shootings at houses of worship from the 2007 New Life Church shooting to the present, see John Blake, "One of the Most Dangerous Hours in America is Now 11 o'clock on Sunday Morning," *CNN*, June 10, 2023, www.cnn.com/2023/06/10/us/faith-violence-security-blake-cec/index.html. See also Katie Day, "Guns, the Construction of Threat, and Lived Ecclesiologies," in this special issue.

[5] See Jennifer Carlson, Kristin A. Goss, and Harel Shapira, "Introduction: New Approaches to Research on Guns," in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Carlson, Kristin A. Goss, and Harel Shapira (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 1; David Yamane, "The Sociology of US Gun Culture," *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 7 (2017): 1–10.

[6] See Abigail Kohn, *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), a pioneering volume in the ethnographic study of guns which finds a variety of gun cultures existing in the San Francisco Bay area. Upholding Kohn and many of the ethnographic studies cited below as models, Yamane calls for the increased use of qualitative methods to study the "social practices" of gun owners and the "social worlds" they inhabit. See Yamane, "The Sociology of US Gun Culture," 7.

[7] Yamane distinguishes between "Gun Culture 1.0" (which centers on hunting and recreation) and "Gun Culture 2.0" (which centers on armed self-defense), writing that "the center of gravity of US gun culture has shifted over the course of the past half-century from recreational shooting to armed self-defense." See Yamane, "The Sociology of US Gun Culture," 5. See also David Yamane, "Gun Culture 2.0: The

simply material but social objects that house meaning relative to the social worlds they occupy;[8] and that within these worlds, guns can be put to a variety of different uses, whether to navigate economic and societal precarity in contexts of civil decline,[9] perform projects of nationalist recovery in the US-Mexico borderlands,[10] or reinforce hegemonic masculinity in states like Texas,[11] among others. These studies indicate not only the diversity of American gun cultures, but also how guns become integrated into particular communities and tethered to particular ways of being in the world. They also indicate the challenge before moral theologians and Christian ethicists seeking to do work on this topic. Such work cannot proceed in abstraction from these lived dynamics. If moral theology and Christian ethics requires attention to the embeddedness of the human person in specific social worlds, and consideration of the moral dimensions of everyday life, then those seeking to reflect normatively upon the place of guns in the United States will find this research indispensable to their efforts.[12]

Evolution and Contours of Defensive Gun Ownership in America," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 704, no. 1 (2022): 20–43, which describes the evolution of Gun Culture 1.0 and Gun Culture 2.0 in greater historical detail, highlights the diversity of subcultures that fall under "Gun Culture 2.0," and speculates about the possible emergence of a gun culture centered around Second Amendment activism which he calls "Gun Culture 3.0."

[8] See Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat, eds., *The Lives of Guns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jonathan M. Metzl, ed., "What Guns Mean: The Symbolic Lives of Firearms," special issue of *Palgrave Communications* (2019): www.nature.com/collections/jdiffcfjba.

[9] See Jennifer Dawn Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), an ethnography of handgun owners in Detroit and Flint, Michigan, in which the practice of concealed carry manifests what she describes as a form of "armed citizenship." Her more recent work continues in this qualitative vein. See Jennifer Dawn Carlson, *Policing the Second Amendment: Guns, Public Law Enforcement, and the Politics of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Jennifer Dawn Carlson, *Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[10] See Harel Shapira, *Waiting for José: The Minutemen's Pursuit of America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), an ethnography of the Minutemen in the US-Mexico border region.

[11] See Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), a qualitative interview-based study carried out in Texas that attends to the lived experience of male and female concealed carriers and which demonstrates, among its findings, that female concealed carry reinforces rather than undercuts patriarchal gender roles (see, in particular, her chapter titled, "Men and Guns," in *Good Guys with Guns*, 28–54).

[12] For additional volumes, see Jennifer Carlson, Kristin A. Goss, and Harel Shapira, eds., *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019); Craig Hovey and Lisa Fischer, eds., *Understanding America's Gun Culture*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2021);

Regrettably, there exist few sustained treatments of guns in the United States by moral theologians and Christian ethicists. This is especially unfortunate given the intricate link sociologists have established between Christianity and gun ownership in the United States.[13] Guns are not simply an entrenched feature of US American life but of US American Christian life. Among the treatments that have appeared, many have been written by pastors and activists. Presbyterian pastor James E. Atwood has authored three volumes, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Exposé*, *Gundamentalism and Where It Is Taking Us*, and *Collateral Damage: Changing the Conversation about Firearms and Faith*, all of which offer wide ranging reflections on guns from a Christian perspective.[14] In *Common Ground: Talking about Gun Violence in America*, Newtown, Connecticut, native and Disciples of Christ minister Donald Gaffney combines personal narrative with reflections on scripture, firearms-related statistics, and American history to facilitate conversation about guns in church communities.[15] Activists Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin's *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who are Weary of Violence* similarly presents reflections on guns for lay audiences.[16] There is

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Benjamin Dowd-Arrow, Terrence D. Hill, and Amy M. Burdette, eds., "Guns and Society," special issue of *Sociological Inquiry* 91, no. 2 (2021): 245–504; Trent Steidley and David Yamane, eds., "Sociological Perspectives on Guns in America," special issue of *Sociological Perspectives* 65, no 1. (2022): 5–235.

[13] See, for example, Andrew L. Whitehead, Landon Schnabel, and Samuel L. Perry, "Gun Control in the Crosshairs: Christian Nationalism and Opposition to Stricter Gun Laws," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 4 (2018): 1–13; 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 "Christian nationalism" (Whitehead et al.), "white evangelical Protestants" (Merino), "Evangelical Protestant affiliation," and "theological conservatism" (Yamane) with higher rates of gun ownership and/or resistance to gun control compared to other religious groups and theological orientations.

[14] James E. Atwood, *Collateral Damage: Changing the Conversation about Faith and Firearms* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2019); James E. Atwood, *Gundamentalism and Where It Is Taking America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017); James E. Atwood, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Exposé* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

[15] Donald V. Gaffney, *Common Ground: Talking about Gun Violence in America* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018). As a child, Gaffney attended Sandy Hook Elementary, the scene of the deadliest mass shooting at an elementary school in US history in 2012.

[16] Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019). Michael Martin is director of RAWtools, an organization that, among its practices, aims to build a network of "Disarming Locations" that refashion guns into garden tools. See "Swords to Plowshares," RAWtools, www.rawtools.org/swords-to-plowshares/.

thematic overlap between the texts. Atwood and Claiborne and Martin, for example, use the metaphor of the gun as idol to suggest that firearms function as a "false god" that seduces their owners with bogus promises of security.[17] Both Atwood and Gaffney draw from their experience as gun owners to build rapport with their readers. All of the books have in common a desire to engage communities on the ground.[18]

Taken together, these books indicate the need for resources that address the place of guns in the United States from a Christian theological perspective. Treatments by theologians and ethicists can complement and complicate the arguments developed in such resources. A handful of texts have recently appeared that do precisely this. Edited by Christopher B. Hays and C. L. Crouch, *God and Guns: The Bible against American Gun Culture* brings together biblical scholars to weigh in on the place of guns in American life.[19] Significantly, the volume acknowledges that there exists "a tension between texts in the Bible that seem to suggest that Christians are not always to refrain from violent means, though nonviolence seems to be the norm."[20] The volume's essays wrestle with this fact, from engagements with the conquest narratives in Joshua (Brent Strawn) to New Testament passages often used to justify gun ownership (Shelly Matthews), bringing penetrating biblical scholarship to bear on this timely issue. In *God and Guns in America*, ethicist Michael Austin draws on virtue ethics, just war, and just peacemaking, among other frameworks, to develop a multilayered consideration of guns in the United States.[21] Also a gun owner, Austin seeks to develop a third way between the status quo and a pacifist rejection of guns to mitigate polarization. Written in response to the 2012 slaying of Trayvon Martin, Kelly Brown Douglas's *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* offers a trenchant critique of Stand Your Ground laws and what she names as a broader "stand-your-ground

[17] Atwood, *America and Its Guns*, 19–32; Claiborne and Martin, *Beating Guns*, 165–80.

[18] There also exists an innumerable set of resources other than books that treat guns from a Christian perspective, from pdfs, brochures, and blog posts, on the one hand, to statements issued by religious leaders and social organizations, on the other. For a survey of these materials, see Ellen Ott Marshall, "Christian Arguments for Gun Violence Prevention: Reflections on Moral Claims in the Context of Advocacy" and Tobias Winright, "Firearms and Moral Theology: A Response," both of which appear in this special issue.

[19] Christopher B. Hays and C. L. Crouch, eds., *God and Guns: The Bible against American Gun Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021).

[20] Stanley Hauerwas, "Foreword," in *God and Guns: The Bible against American Gun Culture*, ix–x.

[21] Michael W. Austin, *God and Guns in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

culture" in the United States that renders life more precarious for persons of color.[22] Douglas draws attention to the racialized dimensions of gun violence in America, which must be centered as theological treatments of this issue continue to be developed. While each of these books have helped advance the conversation, they are painfully few.[23] More scholarship is needed as the place and effects of guns in our common life becomes simultaneously more devastating and banal.

This special issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* (JMT) seeks to build upon these volumes and further stimulate theological reflection on the topic of guns in the United States. It features essays by moral theologians and Christian ethicists from a variety of ecclesial backgrounds who approach this topic from a broad range of areas of expertise. It does not aim to issue a final, conclusive word on the place of guns in the United States, but to advance conversation about the place guns *should* take in our common life.

The issue opens with Conor Kelly's "Gun Laws and Gun Deaths: An Empirical Analysis and Theological Assessment," which surveys the place of gun violence in the United States and what Catholic moral commitment requires regarding this sign of the times. Kelly consults a broad range of studies which suggest that limiting access to guns results in a decrease in gun deaths, highlighting the "growing consensus" that there indeed exists a relationship between firearm availability and firearm mortality. He concludes that, given their commitment to the common good, Catholics should make a prudential judgment to support gun legislation that reduces firearm prevalence, despite challenges to establishing this relationship as causal.

In "Natural Law's Return: Uncovering the Roots of Intractability on Guns as Prelude to New Growth," John Carter proposes a return to natural law discourse as a means of countering the predominance of originalism (and legal positivism, more broadly) in shaping the gun debate in the United States today. His article provides a valuable

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[22] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

[23] While space does not permit commentary, see also Mark Ryan, "Guns and Practical Reason: An Ethical Exploration of Guns and Language," *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, no. 1 (2022): 85–106; John T. Noonan, Jr., "Cooperation in the Culture of Death," *Theological Studies*, 82 no. 1 (2021): 55–68; Benjamin D. Utter and Tarris Rosell, eds., "Bullets, Baptists, and the Bible," special issue of *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 3 (2020); Michelle Byrne, Virginia McCarthy, Abigail Silva, and Sharon Homan, "Health Care Providers on the Frontline: Responding to the Gun Violence Epidemic," in *Catholic Bioethics and Social Justice: The Praxis of US Health Care in a Globalized World*, ed. M. Therese Lysaught and Michael McCarthy (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 31–45; Lyndon Shakespeare, "Friendship, Love, and Mass Shootings: Toward a Theological Response for Gun Control," *Anglican Theological Review* 95, no. 4 (November 2013): 607–625.

overview of the eclipse of natural law in US American legal history and the detrimental effects of this eclipse on Second Amendment interpretation and legislation. Echoing recent calls for a broader recovery of natural law in Christian ethics, Carter views contemporary approaches to natural law as providing a basis upon which the impasse of political polarization about guns in the United States might be mitigated.

In the articles that follow, Luis Vera and Katie Day each consider a specific firearms-related practice—concealed carry and armed church security, respectively—through a particular theological lens. Vera's "Concealed Carry, Agency, and Attention in a Technocratic Context" evaluates concealed carry in light of Pope Francis's critique of the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato Si'*. In applying Francis's critique to the practice of defensive gun carry, Vera argues that we must situate existing analyses of the ethics of guns within a broader consideration of how guns are expressive of our technological condition. In "Guns, the Construction of Threat, and Lived Ecclesiologies," Day considers armed church security, drawing on sociological surveys and her ongoing qualitative research (with David Yamane) regarding the use of guns in ecclesial spaces. She resources Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology to argue that armed church security generates a fortress ecclesiology that counters the church's call to hospitality. Both articles creatively demonstrate how specific theological frameworks can be used to advance reflection on the uses to which guns are put in everyday contexts.

The remaining articles can be seen as charting a pathway from just war to just peacemaking regarding guns in US American life. In "The Christian Handgun Owner and Just War," Michael Grigoni draws upon the just war tradition to reflect on his ethnographic research with Christian handgun owners in central North Carolina. He indicates the benefits and limits of just war for doing so, finding just war helpful, on the one hand, for illuminating the lived experience of his interlocutors, but unable, on the other, to attend to contextually significant factors such as race, which he demonstrates through consideration of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, a civil rights era African American self-defense group. He concludes by gesturing toward just peacemaking as an alternative framework.

Ellen Ott Marshall's "Christian Arguments for Gun Violence Prevention: Reflections on Moral Claims in the Context of Advocacy" begins by identifying moral confusion about the role of vulnerability in gun violence prevention materials and activism. The failure of such materials to distinguish between "existential," "statistical," and "virtuous vulnerability" undercuts their ability to speak clearly and prophetically about the scourge of gun violence in America. She argues that gun violence prevention activism can address this

confusion by centering the vulnerability of those most at-risk to firearm-caused violence, finding the practice of vigil keeping for gun violence victims and survivors clarifying in this regard.

If Marshall turns to a particular practice of peacemaking, Gerald Schlabach, in "Gun Culture, Free Riding, and Nothing Short of Conversion," turns to a just peace ethic to issue a call for conversion among those who privilege their own good over the common good with respect to guns. Framed in terms of the "free-rider problem," Schlabach wrestles with the challenge presented by gun owners who may recognize the collective benefits of reducing the number of guns in circulation but will not give up their guns for personal reasons. Drawing upon just peacemaking, he argues that the only way out of our moral morass may be "nothing short of conversion."

The issue closes with Tobias Winright's "Firearms and Moral Theology: A Response," which offers reflections on the contributions to this special issue. A leading moral theologian in the ethics of war and peace and criminal justice ethics, Winright brings not only his expertise but his lived experience to bear on the question of guns in the United States. His response opens with a dramatic and disturbing account of the 2022 Central Visual and Performing Arts High School shooting as experienced by Winright from Ireland, where he had relocated for an academic appointment, and his daughter, who had remained in St. Louis, Missouri to finish her senior year of high school, and who survived the shooting. Winright's account indicates our collective vulnerability to gun violence in our contemporary landscape, and I am grateful for his own vulnerability in sharing this personal account with us. In the remarks that follow, Winright offers helpful insights, commentary, and criticism to the essays contained herein. He concludes with a provocation—that moral theologians and Christian ethics aim for "accessibility" in their writing on the "life-and-death-matter" of guns in the United States. May we heed his call.

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