

GUN CULTURES AND GUN VIOLENCE – INTEREST GROUP

Conveners: SimonMary Asele Ahiokhai, University of Portland
 Michael R. Grigoni, Wake Forest University
 Moderator: Eli S. McCarthy, Georgetown University
 Presenters: Christina Astorga, University of Portland
 Ki Joo Choi, Princeton Theological Seminary
 David Turnbloom, University of Portland

The second session of the three-year Gun Cultures and Gun Violence Interest Group built upon last year's focus on the cultural conditions that sustain gun prevalence and gun violence in the United States, expanding on this theme while turning to the theological dimensions underlying these social realities. In doing so, this year's session pressed deeper into the central question of the interest group: how might we transform American gun cultures in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the church's living tradition?

Christina Astorga's paper, "Reckoning with Religion and Gun Culture in Light of Christian Nationalism," explored how Christian nationalism fuels and legitimizes the place of guns in the United States. Astorga began by resourcing the sociological research of Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, outlining how the Christian nationalist pursuit of political power seeks to realize a particular social order marked by hierarchy and exclusion along nativist, racist, sexist, and heteronormative lines. With respect to guns, Christian nationalism sanctions the use of force in its boundary-making efforts, generating "a culture of alienation, exclusion, and prejudice" premised on fear of "the other." She then drew from J. Kameron Carter to argue that whiteness constitutes the epicenter of Christian nationalism, enabling it to appear, for its adherents, as a "divinely ordained" political vision that simultaneously "promotes exclusionary, dehumanizing ideologies." In contrast to this ethos of fear and exclusion, Astorga concluded by invoking the Gospel's call to love and justice while asserting that moral theological treatment of guns in the United States must address the interlocking dimensions of politics, race, and religion that appear within this particular manifestation of religious nationalism.

In a paper titled "Asian Americans, Guns, and Belonging: A Case Study on Insecurity and its Root Cause(s)," Ki Joo Choi proposed that we view the United States' increasing dependence on guns and armed securitization as reflective of something more than class-based anxieties or insecurities. His argument critically engaged with how Asian Americans have embraced self-defensive gun ownership and advocated for expanded law enforcement and carceral solutions in response to COVID-era anti-Asian violence. Drawing from these examples, Choi argued that dependence on guns and armed securitization is driven primarily not by economic-based insecurity but something more fundamental—namely, by the role violence plays within constructions of American identity, particularly within the ideal of the "free and prosperous American." This is not to deny that economic distress shapes attitudes toward gun ownership and armed securitization—only that economic materialist accounts fail to recognize "that culture, and specifically *acculturation* into a political community *and* its assumed moral imaginary, matters just as much as economics."

Bringing this to light provides what Choi termed “an immigrant—and specifically Asian immigrant—contribution to the debate on guns,” showing that the desire to belong to a particular political community (“the nation,” or, in this case, the United States) can animate a turn to guns and law enforcement among immigrant communities that renders such uses of violence “seemingly normal or reasonable.” In this way, guns and armed securitization intensify challenges to “fraternal openness,” to draw from Pope Francis, exacerbating how “nonporous political or national identities can contribute to social division rather than solidarity.”

David Turnbloom’s paper, “Icons of Autonomy: Guns as Religious Symbols,” employed a liturgical theological framework to explore the symbolic role played by guns in American society. Drawing from recent sociological research by Paul Froese and Benjamin Dowd-Arrow, among others, he began by arguing that guns often function as sacred symbols for gun owners, satisfying needs that religious symbols have traditionally fulfilled. As such, guns function in ways that are more affective than rational for their owners, signifying agency and security in light of perceived emotional, existential, and social needs. He critiqued approaches to gun control that fail to reckon with this aspect of guns, asserting that a purely legislative approach to gun prevalence and gun violence will ultimately fall short. An alternative, more holistic approach is needed, one that is cognizant of the symbolic power of guns and committed to grappling with the cultural and spiritual dimensions of gun attachment. Such an approach would “offer an alternative symbolic world” that challenges the association of guns with feelings of safety, dignity, and empowerment. It would be context-specific, developed in response to the concerns of individuals and communities that use guns in light of available religious resources. Most fundamentally, it would recognize that the gun issue must be addressed at the affective and existential level—that appeals to statistics and argumentation, or dependence on legislative reform alone, are insufficient, as the role of guns in the United States is a profoundly liturgical one.

The papers generated a robust discussion that brought these many themes into dialogue with each other, building on our ongoing discussion of this pressing issue.

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