

#767 The Deified Gun

Colleagues,

This week we send you a “must read” book review by occasional contributor Richard Gahl. Dick’s piece speaks for itself, so I won’t bother with introductory embellishments. Read, mark, learn—and prepare to weep, especially when you get to the end.

I do note that Dick touches on something that got a mention in [last week’s post](#), Luther’s notion of the sinner being “curved in” on the sinner’s self. A reader wrote yesterday to correct my rendering of the concept in Latin. It’s not “curvatus in se,” but “incurvatus in se,” or more precisely—so the reader recalled hearing long ago from some precise Germans—“incurvatus in se et seipsum.” It seems that Luther may have picked the concept up from Augustine. The reader went on to cite a passage from Luther’s lectures on Romans where it makes an appearance:

Our nature, by the corruption of the [first sin](#), [is] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the [works-righteous](#) and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.

I think you’ll find that deeply germane to what Dick is talking about in his review.

Amid the penitence that this calls for—

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

America and its Guns: A Theological Exposé.

By James E. Atwood. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.

228 pages. US\$27.

Jimmy had a pistol stuck in the waistband at the small of his back, and he reached back under his coat and touched it from time to time, a talisman of power.

John Sandford, Mad River. 2012

Atwood, a retired Presbyterian pastor and avid hunter, has been an advocate for more effective ways to stop gun violence for over thirty-six years. A few facts pulled together from various sections of the book: 300,000,000 guns in the US; an average of 30,000 gun related deaths per year; children in the US are twenty-five times more likely to die from guns than children in twenty-five other industrialized nations combined; half of gun-related deaths are suicides; with the presence of a gun in the home American women are five times more likely to be victims of domestic violence. In a word, America, we have a problem!

Atwood also documents the NRA's influence in quashing any legislation that might have a negative impact on the gun culture. A report that Ohio is one of two states that issues concealed-carry weapons permits to the blind is enough to question the sanity of the legislators of my home state. Chapters on media violence in cultures around the world and the creeping intrusion of gun language into everyday speech are sobering. This book is an important read for church leaders in our current gun-culture climate.

But what really makes this material sizzle is the theological exposé. Walter Brueggemann's foreword introduces the idolatry of America's gun culture. He characterizes it as "a false authority

that requires uncompromising allegiance and that makes promises of well-being that it cannot keep (xi).” A good friend has put it this way for some people: In guns we trust!

Twice Atwood quotes former NRA executive Warren Cassidy’s statement: “You would get a far better understanding of the NRA if you were approaching us as one of the great religions of the world (19, 78).” Such a self-assessment makes gun advocates into true believers. Atwood lists three conditions that prevail when a gun becomes an idol.

1. An owner believes there are no circumstances when a regulation or restriction for public safety should be placed upon it.
2. An owner believes that guns don’t kill; they only save lives.
3. An owner has no doubt that guns preserve America’s most cherished values. (21)

He sees America’s idolatry of guns “as a confrontational belief system based on acquiring power over others...Those who believe need guns to prove to themselves and to others that they are in control, to protect them from harm, and to give them a sense of security (22).” At this point Atwood brings in Luther’s first-commandment comments from the Large Catechism about the meaning of having a god. Some pages later, Atwood references Letty Russell’s statement from her book *Becoming Human*: “Persons and groups who are anxious about whether they measure up to cultural standards of superiority usually cut down others to their size.” He adds to her statement: an effective tool for cutting others down to size is a gun (88). John Sandford’s “talisman of power” is an apt rephrasing of the magic of the godlike power that captures trust. Luther’s definition of sin, curved in on one’s self, echoes here.

Reverence for guns teaches two paradoxical emotions:

omnipotence and fear. Omnipotence as one feels the thrill of being in charge and able to dominate others, and fear as one begins to suspect enemies or potential enemies who might want to take away one's newfound power. (116)

The writings of Walter Wink regarding principalities and powers, especially the phrase “redemptive violence,” figure prominently in Atwood’s idolatry schema for guns.

The fifth commandment is not neglected in these pages. Violence is brought front and center already in Chapter 5, “Violence Lite and its Insatiable Observers.” The second half of the book picks up this theme in theological detail. Atwood states that “if one looks to tools of violence for deliverance, one grows to be like those tools. The Psalmists words ring true: Those who make idols are like them; so are all who trust in them [Psalm 115:8] (114).”

Former NRA board member Jeff Cooper, writing in *Guns and Ammo*, illustrates the extreme of looking to tools of violence for society solutions. “The consensus is that no more than five to ten people in a hundred who die by gunfire in Los Angeles are any loss to society...It would seem a valid service to keep them [gangs] well-supplied with ammunition (128).” In a word, my life is more important than many other lives.

Atwood brings this argument about violence to a stunning conclusion quoting from John Dear’s 1993 book *Disarming the Heart: Toward a Vow of Nonviolence*.

Violence is the act of forgetting who we are: brothers and sisters of one another, each one a child of God. Violence occurs in those moments when we forget and deny our basic identity as God’s children, when we treat others as if they were worthless instead of priceless and cling to our own

selfish desires, possessions, and security. In the effort to claim our inheritance as loved children of God, we must love one another, even our enemies. We must remember who we are. (213-214)

Atwood wrote this book to involve increasing numbers of churches and people of faith in an important conversation for our times. He rejects the premise that reducing gun violence is the purview of the political process. "Violence and unnecessary death require spiritual, ethical, and moral solutions" (192). He makes his case in a book worth careful reading and discussion. The time is now to debunk the myths and idolatry of many captured by the gun culture. His haunting question is too late, however, for the teachers and students of Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Dare we ask where twenty elementary school children would hide in a classroom if a monster kicked open the door holding an assault pistol with an enlarged magazine of thirty rounds? (121)

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