

#771 Idolatry and the Gun Debate

This week's Thursday Theology came to us several weeks ago from Dr. Peter Keyel, an immunologist and Crossings board member whose theological writings appear throughout the Crossings website. In this piece, Peter responds to [Thursday Theology #767](#), in which Pr. Richard Gahl reviewed *America and its Guns: A Theological Exposé* by James E. Atwood. Although Peter hasn't read the book itself, he has gleaned from Dick's review a clear conception of Atwood's central claim that American gun culture amounts to idolatry of the gun. In his response, Peter calls that claim into question, while applying the Crossings matrix to diagnose both sides of the gun debate.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

[Based on Gahl's review,] I was somewhat disappointed by the absence of Christ in Atwood's book. Specifically, Atwood's diagnosis appears to be off, and his prognosis appears to be that more morality, more ethics, and more regulation will fix the problem.

I do not feel that Atwood has correctly diagnosed the problem. I don't feel that he successfully convicts gun owners of idolatry, because the first two of his conditions for idolatry misunderstand most gun owners' feelings. Perhaps, as an avid hunter, he bases his diagnosis on his own struggle to deny the omnipotence that his guns give him and the challenges that he has faced in dealing with the seductive call of the idols in his gun cabinet. But to me his diagnosis sounds more like a "y'all"

diagnosis that accuses others of violating the Law, rather than a “we all” diagnosis that incriminates the speaker as well. He has an escape hatch to living on the correct side of the Law, which is why he can end with a moral solution to his problem.

I think guns are the external symptoms of the idol at work, and not the idol itself. All of Atwood’s stats from the opening of the review make for a reasonable step 1 in the Crossings matrix, not a step 3. Atwood does get to step 2, when he discusses trusting guns to keep oneself safe, but he keeps this diagnosis limited to one side of the gun-control debate. Step 2 can more properly be expanded to our collective desire for safety. Whether we trust our own guns or those of the government, we are still seeking safety from an earthly power and not trusting in God. If we perceive the necessity of government regulation, then we are criticizing ourselves, implying that we cannot be trusted not to kill. Similarly, if we perceive the need of guns to protect us from government, then we are criticizing the society we’ve built, implying that we cannot trust our own institution. Either way, we reason that that something—either gun ownership or government control—is a sad but necessary institution. (Theologically we might even say we live in a fallen world.) This is as deep as we can get in a secular discussion, as it comes down to a cost-benefit analysis of which route is better, however that might be quantified. Of course, that such an analysis is done by sinners means that it will never be done right, even when we can agree on what “better” is. In the context of gun discussions, especially those considering numbers of people killed and gun idolatry, “safe” is usually one benchmark, or the benchmark, for “better.”

Theologically, though, we can move to Step 3, which Atwood seems to shy away from, since he does not need it for his analysis. In Step 3, we see that our idol here is not guns, but Safety. This idol gets all of us, whether we rely on the safety of our own

guns, or whether we rely on the government to keep us safe. The events at Sandy Hook showed us that both sides of the gun debate are half right. Neither gun ownership nor government regulation saved those kids and teachers. We are not safe in this world, and atrocities like these serve to ram that point home violently and disturbingly. We can try to be as safe as we want, but we have no protection from God, who smashes our idols of Safety on a regular basis. And yet it seems as though we'll go to our deaths trusting in Safety.

Atwood avoids Jesus, so far as I can tell from the review, at least in his function as Christ. Jesus doesn't trust in Safety. At the beginning of this Lenten season, Jesus rejects Satan's promise that the angels will bear him up lest he dash his foot against a stone. For Lent II, Jesus ignores more warnings, this time that Herod is out to get him. Instead, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, much to the astonishment of all who worship Safety. As expected, Jesus pays the price for not trying to be Safe: He is crucified. Jesus' obedience is to God, though, and that obedience is justified: God raises Jesus from the dead, showing us that there is another way.

Faith in this other way liberates us all from the stranglehold that Safety has on our hearts. We trust that death is not the end for us, and that we don't need to be Safe to save our lives. We can go to those places of death and proclaim Christ crucified. Those whose hearts are no longer hung on Safety don't need guns to keep them safe, no matter how lawful gun ownership may be. Likewise, the government is not the authority we trust to solve the problem of keeping us safe—we're in God's hands.

In some ways, we have now come to a conclusion similar to Atwood's, with a couple of important changes. Similar to Atwood, as people of faith, we can't help but be involved in sharing the Good News of the true life provided in Jesus that is not

provided by Safety. Also similarly, we don't need guns to carry out our work; we have weapons of the Spirit. But our targets aren't the guns, the government regulations, or even the violence that is done in this sin-sick world. Rather, our target is healing the sick God-connections that we all have. When we trust in the resurrection of the dead, the threat of violence ceases to be a threat. We trust that Easter follows Good Friday.