



FACE . . .

Urban Gun Control: A Tornado Warning

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WHEN I WAS AN INTERN MINISTER AT A CHURCH LOCATED IN THE MIDDLE OF A public housing project in Chicago, I experienced an urban tornado warning. At least that is what it felt like to me, having grown up in southern Minnesota where tornado warnings regularly drove us into basement hiding.

About 1:30 in the afternoon, word spread in the project that there was going to be a gang fight that afternoon. The streets cleared as effectively as if a civil warning siren had gone off and a funnel cloud had been sighted. The neighborhood elementary school let everyone go home for the day immediately. Within minutes an eerie silence had enveloped the entire project. Through the church's window, I could see gang members on the front steps of the highrise across the street loading their revolvers, eyes peeled for action. No police ever arrived.

Much of urban America lives under the cloud of a perpetual tornado watch. The conditions are ripe for violent storms at any time. Routinely, the watch condition escalates into a warning, as attacks hit home. For those who do not live in these urban areas, it is difficult to conceive of the continual state of alarm which prevails. Like serving in combat duty, daily life exhausts one's adrenalin and stretches nerves to their limit. In this atmosphere, mistrust reigns and the easiest response is escape, whether into the outer suburbs or, for those without such means, into one's armed basement.

Civil society breaks down under these pressures. Democratic participation seems a luxury, even counter-productive where the authorities have lost their power to protect innocent lives. Is it any wonder that authoritarian pentecostal and fundamentalist churches thrive under these stresses, replicating theologically the armed basements of urban pilgrims?

To me, this is the context for the discussion of gun control. Of course guns have many uses besides being the urban weapon of choice. For example, I like to fish, and pursue the elusive northern pike with an array of weapons. The use of guns for sport hunting is, I believe, morally little different from the use of barbed

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TO FACE

Urban Gun Control: It's the Symbolism, Stupid

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SHE STOOD UP IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND DECLARED, "IT'S THE GUNS, stupid." I don't remember her name, but I do remember her emphasis on the *guns*. It occurred to me during that evening's newscast that this assertion is on the same continuum as the pronouncement associated with the National Rifle Association, "Guns don't kill people. People kill people" — on the same continuum, but at the other end.

Both pro- and anti-firearm groups see the firearm as a tool. Most of us have tools — hammers, drills — but these instruments are in an entirely different world from the firearm. What separates these two worlds is the symbolism factor. As Tillich told us, the symbol's point of departure into a transcendent world is the physical object — the bread and wine, the Bible, and, in a less obviously spiritual context, the dollar bill and the .45 automatic. Put in other words, the .45 has numerous transcendent associations that the hammer and drill press lack entirely.

In its ability to provoke flights into symbolic worlds beyond the physical, the firearm is most prodigious. It can mean power and control. Samuel Colt called it an equalizer and a peacemaker. Other people, though, remember the gun carried when tromping through corn fields in late October with their fathers. Former Boy Scouts remember the .22 and the discipline of a firing-range competition. A colleague, a veteran of Vietnam, never wants to see another rifle, owing to what happened to his buddies in a jungle ambush; he never tells what he did there. The gun is a symbol. It is the symbolism that determines its use.

The American firearm culture tends toward apocalyptic symbols and structures. By locating evil in external forces, reifying it, the apocalyptic culture then creates an enemy that firearms can effectively attack. When the cold war raged, for example, there was a degree of credibility for some to hear that what the USSR wanted most was an America that had unilaterally disarmed itself at every level, from the ICBM to the pistol. For this apocalyptic vision, unfortunately, Commu-

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hooks for sport fishing. Certain people may object to both. But banning sport guns is no more a moral imperative and no more important to our civic life than banning barbed hooks for sport fishing.

The analogy breaks down, of course, in connection with guns used by persons against persons. Barbed hooks do not provide a very effective means of coercing the conduct of other persons. But *handguns* (in particular) are remarkably functional coercive tools against persons. As a physical extension of personal strength, handguns are simple, easily transported, cheap and effective.

The moral dilemma of urban gun control is that this tool of power is, in many people's hearts, a model of both evil and good. It is evil in its deliberate (and random) destructive power. It is good in its capacity to protect innocent persons against harm from others. At least that is the gut-level feeling which many urban basement-dwellers share.

I am not a pacifist, nor do I believe that all swords will become plowshares (or revolvers become computer keyboards) before the consummation of the New Creation. But a penultimate, proleptic ethic cannot be content with ever-intensifying cycles of violence. Out of that discontent, I recommend a long-term and a short-term approach.

The long-term approach is to address systematically the fundamental *powerlessness* that drives urban armed violence. This powerlessness is twofold. It is experienced by the children of desperation who use guns to extend their sense of self. It is also experienced by the desperate victims of violence who are alienated from democratic and police structures of authority and try to draw the line at least at self-preservation. Until this two-dimensional sense of urban powerlessness is effectively addressed, there will be no rest for the weary. Christians, as followers of the preeminent victim of violence, who believe that his cross breaks the cycle of violence with hope of new beginnings, should be at the forefront of this effort.

The short-term approach is to limit the tools of urban violence. That means limiting access to handguns. The simplest proposal would be to treat handguns as urban war weapons; we don't let private citizens own tanks or bazookas, and we shouldn't let them own handguns. In light of the political impossibility of this proposal – yes it cuts too wide and threatens the sense of safety of law-abiding citizens who want handguns in their basements for the tornados which they rightly could still expect – the second best approach is to whittle away at the ease with which handguns can be purchased and maintained. There are many hopeful proposals, from waiting periods and background checks to licensing handguns like another horribly deadly American weapon, the automobile.

Gun control asks urban basement dwellers to trust in the power of civil society and democratic processes, and not resort to alienated self-help. To the extent that trust has been irretrievably lost in our cities, gun control will not be possible. Though it seems to work in other nations, maybe it is impossible in America. I hope and pray that it is not. In southern Minnesota, the sky clears after the tornado weather front passes. What kind of united "front" will it take to clear the urban skies?

nism proved not to be a quality enemy. Nowadays, the apocalyptic construct of demonic evil has gone national. Demanding always an external enemy, apocalyptically-hyped people look to crime in the streets or to homosexuals as the locus of satanic attack. Applied to the threat of crime, the apocalyptic script makes weapons central in this battle; Dirty Harry's huge .44 Magnum is the present-day analog of Archangel Michael's invincible sword. The gun makes one equal to meeting the larger-than-life satanic attack.

So it is probably not the guns in themselves that constitute the American dilemma. Were that the case, Switzerland and Norway too would be awash in a sea of blood. Both nations have a requirement that every able-bodied man from 18 to 45 serve in a civilian militia. They are required to have their weapons and ammunition at *home* in full working order. By comparison to artillery these are small arms, but they are very powerful, and many are capable of full automatic fire, in other words, assault rifles. But the symbolism of these weapons indicate they are in peoples' homes only for the purpose of *national* self defense.

What does all this mean for the church? I take it to suggest that, instead of spending time trying to get laws passed to curtail ownership of weapons, we turn to understanding how our theology of evil addresses these critical matters. We all know about the *idolatry of the divine* wherein we substitute an object, or an action, for God, the infinite. That is, we accord divine status, for example, to wealth, family, productivity, fame, or security. On the other hand, we identify other objects or actions (booze, cards, drugs, premarital sex) with evil, thereby creating as it were an *idolatry of the demonic*. Identifying evil as a *thing* ignores the basic Christian theme that evil originates in the heart, a heart turned in upon itself.

Clergy ought to understand how symbols operate in people's lives. Here we should demonstrate our special expertise by dismantling the symbolism that mystifies firearms; guns do not inherently possess power and security. Violence does not mean power, as Hannah Arendt told us, but rather its opposite.

Then too it is probably the case that the apocalyptic scripts that stem ultimately from our tradition constitute a major increment in the urban homicide rate. We have learned this script from the movies since we were kids, that evil people must be destroyed. If we leave the theater and the evil person has not been killed, we have an unfulfilled feeling about that movie. Hollywood obliges us: the bad guys are wiped out by ever more novel and powerful weapons. We prefer strong medicine, thinking that anyone who actually believes evil can be redeemed, rather than destroyed, is an unrealistic wimp. Capital punishment is part of this same script.

Gun control is too easy; it is passing the buck. We have not helped in extreme need. Desperate people kill; they have nothing to lose; they have only violence to cure their anger. Someone who has lots to lose by killing avoids violence, and does not feel backed into a corner from which he or she can emerge only by shooting, stabbing, or clubbing. We have created violent subcultures where all the sharks feed on each other. We have done this by withholding justice in the form of hope, food, education, jobs, medicine, housing, and police protection. We cannot then climb into our pulpits proclaiming gun control and content ourselves that the job is done.