

Thou Shalt Own Guns: An Analysis of Christian Gun Ownership in the United States

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Sunday, November 5, 2017 marked the 555th mass shooting in the United States since June 2016 (NYT Editorial Board) when Texas resident Devin Kelley opened fire at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, killing twenty-six people and wounding twenty more with an assault rifle (Goldman, Fernandez, Pérez-Peña). This shooting is yet another example of the growing gun-violence epidemic in the United States, but the location of the shooting, a Christian church, also serves to highlight the complex dichotomy between guns, weapons of war and destruction, and Christianity, a self-professed religion of peace and tolerance. War and destruction seem anathema to the Christian doctrine, yet according to a survey done by the Public Religion Research Institute, over half of white Evangelical Christians reported living in a household with at least one gun (PRRI). Christian gun ownership is encouraged and perpetuated in the United States through the American culture's historical context of individual rights, religious exceptionalism, and cohesive demographic groups.

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Gun laws are as old as the idea of America itself, with the first gun legislation being passed in 1619 by the first General Assembly of Virginia in Jamestown (Spitzer 57). The law demanded that “no man do sell or give any Indians any piece, shot, or powder...being held a traitor to the colony and of being hanged...” (Spitzer 57). This stipulation demonstrates the struggle between the colonists and indigenous people, a defining feature of The United States’ history and the repercussions of which are still being felt today. Firearms acted as a key weapon in that struggle and ultimately lead to colonial “victory” against the Native Americans, thus securing their role of importance in the American conversation. The early governments’ fixation with gun laws was largely centered on gun possession, storage, and regulation, stating concern for public safety and little regard for private citizen ownership (Spitzer 57).

Yet the birth of the Articles of Confederation represented a shift in American ideology, especially in regard to tyranny and power-sharing, both concerns deeply rooted in American gun-ownership (Williams 992). The Articles display the American obsession with individualism and exceptionalism as they tried to reconcile states’ want for independence with the need for a central government to grant them legitimacy. The ratification of the Constitution and subsequent Bill of Rights solidified this new government and birthed the Second Amendment, which addressed the colonists’ strongly-held fear of a standing army predisposed to corruption by “establishing a well-regulated militia” during peace times (Williams 993). However, it is important to note that the right to serve in this militia and thus, the right to own a gun, was only granted to white males; gun regulation became a function that reinforced social and economic status in colonial society (Williams 994). In antebellum America, this distinction enforced that serving in the militia and owning a gun should only be reserved for

white males and that it should be viewed as both a right and privilege, sentiments still strongly held within American culture.

The Reconstruction era marked a dismantling of the antebellum systems of power and social order which perpetuated white-male gun ownership as citizenship and rights were extended to black males (Williams 1000). The hostility of the Civil War was manifested in part by the perceived reduction of white males' rights which they equated to a lessening of their masculinity (Williams 1000). This is an early example of the majority viewing rights as a "zero-sum" game. That is, the notion that if any group other than my own is granted equal rights or privileges, some of mine must have to be revoked. This ideology was extremely prevalent in Southern state reactions to Congress' disbanding of Confederate militias. Many Southerners viewed it as an abuse of Congressional authority and violation of the Second Amendment (Williams 1006). Because Southerners began to count gun control regulations as typical Reconstruction era policy that attempted to quell Southern culture and independence, many refused to relinquish their "rebel" attitudes of individualism and view gun control issues with special zeal (Williams 1006).

It would be remiss to discuss the foundation of American attitudes toward gun control without examining the crucial role religion played in not only their founding, but also their perpetuation in today's modern cultural landscape. When the United States was in its infancy, Protestantism enjoyed a majority share of the population; however, there was a prominent split within the denomination separating middle-class adherents who attended churches that fostered capitalist attitudes and the suppressed denominations who were forced to pursue the American frontier in hopes of more religious tolerance (Young 301). Two denominations in particular, the Baptists and the Methodists, adopted organizational strategies in the West that appealed to the "spirit and lifestyle of the frontier" to attract frontiers-people who were

already installing the tradition of gun ownership (Young 301). Such denominations were particularly attractive to early settlers of the West because they established fundamentalist movements which bound the pioneers with little religious dogma and placed a significant emphasis on personal salvation and individualism, two defining attitudes of the American pioneer movement (Young 301).

While religious attitudes played an important role in establishing gun ownership for the early settlers, the rural setting to which they immigrated was a significant factor in maintaining it because of the necessity for hunting and forms of self-defense (Young 301). This implies that gun ownership had just as much to do with culture, socialization, and practicality as it did with religious attitudes for early Protestants (Young 301). Consequently, large groups of Protestants still remain in rural areas today, especially in the South, and their ancestors' attitudes toward hunting and gun-ownership are prevalent within modern society (Young 301). For many in these rural communities, the firearm has evolved as a symbol of self-protection which is particularly attractive to fundamentalists and key in perpetuating the individualistic attitudes on which their heritage was founded (Young 302). Still today, Protestantism is a significant predictor of gun ownership because the religious fundamentalism and frontier heritage key in its founding pervade rural communities and remain as important cultural trademarks for many Christian Southerners (Young 307).

When mixed together, the combination of these attitudes forms a recipe ripe with American-Protestant exceptionalism and pride. Because Protestant beliefs are so intertwined with religious justifications for gun ownership, some have made the bold assertion that gun ownership is not only justified by religion, but encouraged by God. Mark Rogers, founder of christiangunowner.com, a website "dedicated to those millions of Christians. The patriots who enjoy the shooting sports..." has said, "Being a Christian is a joy. Being an armed Christian is a

responsibility” (Rogers). This statement by Rogers displays Christian gun-owner exceptionalist attitudes by implying that God commands Christians to own guns and that they will receive happiness if they are obedient to that call.

Furthermore, websites like christiangunowner.com are part of a larger trend in which Christians attempt to build their own autonomous and self-supporting communities that represent the values and ideals they share. The recent comradery comes in the wake of a growing number of Christians who believe they experience religious discrimination equal to or more than other minority groups in the United States (Green). As many as eight out of ten evangelical Protestants shared this sentiment in 2016 (Green). These communities also represent a sort of defiance within evangelical Christianity that rejects modern secularist ideas and appeals to a time when Christians perceive that the majority of the nation did as well. This is evidenced by the fact that within the same evangelical Protestant group, six in ten believe America was once a Christian nation, but has strayed from those values (Green). As a result, many evangelicals have adopted an offensive attitude and believe that any attempt to regulate what they hold sacred, guns in this case, is an assault on their rights that will ultimately lead to the erosion of their other civil liberties (Miller).

Christians have manifested this idea in many different ways including boycotts, alternative media outlets, and support for Christian-owned businesses. A recent example of the latter occurred in 2015 when Brant Williams, owner of a Tennessee gun shop named “Frontier Firearms” —a name reminiscent of the link between Protestant frontier culture and gun ownership—began offering a discount to customers who proclaimed their faith in the store (Robins). When stating his reasoning for the discount, Williams asserted, “I want to give Christians an opportunity to openly profess their faith...enough is enough. America is turning its back on Christians” (Robins). The attitude

expressed in Williams' statements echoes that of those eight in ten protestants who believe they experience religious persecution and must find subtle ways to "fight the system" which is threatening to compromise their lifestyle. For Williams, it is offering a discount to Christians at his gun store. For others, it is simply owning guns, and lots of them, or supporting the people who do.

For Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr., it is offering free classes for those interested in obtaining a Virginia concealed carry permit and opening a gun range at his private Christian university (Shapiro). Though Falwell Jr. has similar religious motives as previously discussed, he is also motivated by the fear of an external terror attack (Shapiro). Speaking of his university, he says, "It's where the terrorists are most likely to strike" (Shapiro). Liberty's conservative Christian roots cannot be ignored in this context. Falwell Jr.'s statement again reinforces the Christian exceptionalist thinking that leads to self-victimization and the idea that Christians would be attacked as a result of the religious persecution they face. It also serves to exemplify yet another justification used by Christians for the necessity of guns in their religious dogma: self-defense (Miller). Terrorist attacks executed by either domestic or foreign actors manifest in a very physical sense the idea that Christians are in danger of being harmed. Now Christians believe they are faced with the metaphorical battle against secularism and the very physical one of being attacked on college campuses or in their churches. So what makes Christians so apt to defend ownership of the same weapons they fear?

In the past three decades, with decisions like *District of Columbia v. Heller*, which establishes the right of the average citizen to possess a handgun, gun laws have become far laxer, a trend Spitzer argues, "...has nothing to do with improving safety or security in society, but everything to do with politics" (83). Yet in today's modern political landscape, it has proved difficult to distinguish between policy maker's

political views and their religious beliefs. Politicians have become increasingly reliant on rhetoric that blames a corrupt society for gun violence and suggest that only prayer can conquer its devastation (Miller). For example, former Texas Governor Rick Perry asserts, “Laws, the only redoubt of secularism, will not suffice. Let us all return to our places of worship and pray for help” (Miller). A statement questioning the potency of government made by such a high-ranking politician brings to light a larger demographic trend correlating government distrust with gun ownership. Jiobu and Curry conducted a study that found people who lack confidence in the government are more likely to own guns and of these people, the majority are likely to be Protestant (Yamane 625).

Another culprit responsible for gun violence, according to some evangelical protestant law-makers, is that America is becoming morally corrupt as a result of secularism and all the vices that accompany such ideology; namely: taking prayer out of public schools. Former Governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee says of the violence in the United States: “We don’t have a crime problem, or a gun problem, or even a violence problem. We have a sin problem. And since we’ve ordered God out of our schools and communities...we really shouldn’t act so surprised when all hell breaks loose” (Wittner). Huckabee’s argument seems to echo the American public’s, as sixty-one percent of Americans are in favor of “allowing daily prayer to be spoken in the classroom” (Klein). Statistics like this lead two in three Americans say they consider the United States to be a majority Christian nation that was founded on Christian principles (PEW). Such thinking by politicians and law-makers leads to a perceived Christian religious majority in the United States that some believe entitles them to certain God-given rights, like owning a gun.

These anecdotal responses are just a few cases that clearly illustrate Christian attitudes and responses toward gun control. When

examined individually, each is just a representation of a viewpoint; however, when observed holistically, these quotes all exemplify the commonly-held belief among Christian-Americans that America is or once was a Christian nation and that being a good Christian is a foundational American value. The belief that being a good American inherently means being Christian is shared by about one in three Americans (Zauzmer). Even more, as many as forty-five percent of Americans say that “sharing national customs and traditions” with others is an important identifier of their American heritage. That heritage is especially important for evangelical Christians because it ties into the shared belief that America was founded as a Christian nation and for this reason, the Constitution was ordained by God (Wittner). The Second Amendment is of course included in this series of God-ordained American rights and some evangelical Christian gun-owners cite this reason as a justification for their continued ownership firearms (Wittner).

These statistics bring into question important demographic trends within the gun-ownership movement. According to Pew Research Center in 2017, gun ownership is most common among white men with around forty-eight percent of white men saying they own a gun (Parker et. al). This is double the rate of gun-ownership compared to that of white women and nonwhite men with only twenty-four percent of them owning guns (Parker et. al). Only sixteen percent of nonwhite women own guns in the United States (Parker et. al). Among these gun-owners, sixty-six percent own more than one gun (Parker et. al). Furthermore, non-gun owning Americans are expressing desires to own one in the future. Fifty-two percent of the seven in ten American adults who do not own a gun currently say they could see themselves owning one at some point in the future; when examining men specifically, these numbers rise to sixty-two percent who express the desire to own a gun (Parker et al).

Current demographic trends within the United States are telling, and they form cohesive and polarizing demographic groups. With half of the white men in the United States owning guns, a rate double that of white women and minority men, it is clear that guns are a manifestation of power and the current gun-ownership trends are a patriarchal expression of that power within modern society (Williams 988). These trends echo the sentiments of those Reconstruction era white Southerners and modern evangelical Christians previously discussed. These groups have in common the feeling that minority groups pose a fundamental threat to their civil liberties and that attempts to grant any group rights but their own, is a zero-sum game. Their frustration is manifested in a number of ways, but can assuredly be counter-acted by exercising a right and for many, a duty, they have always enjoyed: owning a gun.

The dichotomy of gun ownership within the American Christian religion remains paradoxical, but examining American history, the modern political climate, and demographic trends in the United States provides a glimpse into the explanation of why over half of evangelical protestants are gun owners. The political context in which these questions are being examined is one that is growing increasingly polarized and religiously motivated. Meanwhile, gun violence is making frequent headlines and the number of victims is growing daily. Attacks like the one in Sutherland Springs, Texas are a painful reminder of this fact and highlight the failures of the status quo to prevent horrible acts like this from happening. However, with failure comes opportunity for change and reflection, which is what must happen in the wake of this crisis and so many others. Gun ownership is a part of American history and fundamental in many Christians' religious beliefs, but exceptionalism must not be the basis for political action. Effective change in gun legislation must find a way to reconcile the deeply-rooted American cultural and religious beliefs about guns while also

encouraging more responsible and regulated gun-owners in the United States.

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