

American Gun Culture Encounters Christian Ethics: A Clash of Narratives

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The “Theo-ethics” of the Gun

The ethical debate about guns in America pivots around the themes of harmful consequences and individual liberty. Gun control advocates argue for greater legal control of guns on the grounds that such a policy would save lives. They envision a society ruled by an enlightened policy that seeks to minimize harm and maximize benefit for all. On the other hand, proponents of gun control shift the focus in the debate from consequences to individual liberty, which they elevate to a position of overriding value. The government’s primary aim should be to protect individual liberty rather than promote the good of society as a whole. Of course, one important way in which liberty of choice is to be exercised is in using guns to protect myself against the choices of others. The circularity of this logic seems to fall beneath the radar.

The most noteworthy characteristic of this ethical debate is how quickly it leads to antagonism rather than resolution, as the parties seem unable to discover common ground. Yet I will be concerned here as much with what is not often made explicit in these debates. Why do appeals to harmful consequences—supported increasingly by hard evidence—fail to create moral consensus on gun policy? And why do we prize a conception of freedom that results in defensive fear toward our neighbor?

In this essay I hope to bring out the underlying vision of persons in society on which the familiar debate rests, though in inchoate form. Charles Taylor helpfully refers to such visions as

“social imaginaries (Taylor 2007, 171-176).” Social imaginaries are worlds of human significance, ontological landscapes for meaningful action. They are, Taylor argues, grounded in narratives that orient human agents in a timeful world (Taylor 1989, 25-52).” As Stanley Hauerwas has noted, we can only act in the world we see, and our vision is shaped by the narratives we grant authority in our lives. I will there make reference in what follows to rival “theo-ethical visions,” and draw on this concept to open new horizons for ethical discourse. The debate outlined above, I will argue, rests on a vision where society exists to serve the interests of the private individual. Moreover, it is one that instructs us to regard others as a continuous source of threat to “my good.” It is a short step from here to the normalization of violence.

In this chapter, I will be reading certain arguments and practices regarding guns in America as the contentious negotiation of a theo-ethical vision. In the first section, I describe two ways that guns are involved in generating a vision of social relationships in America. In analyzing these socially significant narratives critically, I aim to show that despite surface differences the two share much in common.

In the second section, I attempt to articulate an alternative theo-ethical vision. Here I suggest that to see both the tensions within American theologies of guns and the kind of alternative Christianity provides requires moving past modern individualism. Aristotle’s account of the role of friendship in a polity provides a way forward. For it represents an ethical vision wherein social belonging is a condition for the possibility of mature human agency. Yet by itself Aristotle’s friendship does not constitute a true rival to American gun culture for at its borders violence stands guard over a society of friends. I therefore turn to Aquinas’s adaptation of Aristotelian friendship, or from *philia* to *caritas*, to think beyond the moral vision of gun culture in the U.S.A.

Having broached the topic of Christian ethics, my own field, I go on to consider how many American Christians have accommodated themselves to the assumptions of American gun culture. Thus, in the third section I point out how the failure of Christians in America to name the incompatibilities between *caritas* and American gun culture is generating tensions that are irresolvable short of repentance. In other words, while I contend that Christianity provides a true rival to the theo-ethical vision of American gun culture, and helps to expose some of its contradictions, I will also argue that American Christians themselves have not acted consistently with their normative tradition.

Throughout the chapter, though especially in section three, I will refer to Abigail Disney's 2015 film *The Armor of Light* to provide illustrations for some of my claims. The documentary tells the story of conservative, Christian lobbyist Rev. Rob Schenck, a pro-lifer whose conscience becomes increasingly disturbed by the ease with which fellow pro-lifers affirm both the sanctity of life and the sacredness of the right to bear arms. His crisis of conscience is heightened when searches for sources in biblical Christianity for this consensus. His story is told alongside that of gun control spokeswoman and activist Lucy McBath. Whereas Schenck approaches the issue of gun violence from an establishment position in the political arm of conservative Evangelicalism, McBath is propelled into activism when an NRA member, encouraged by Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, shot dead her unarmed son at a gas station. Yet I will be primarily concerned with how the film documents Schenck's process of falling out with the Conservative Christian elite.

How "America" Shapes a 'Theo-ethics of the Gun'

In this section, I suggest that what we are confronting in contemporary American gun culture are “theologies” that project a reality within which human agents may orient themselves. A key aspect of these theologies is how they facilitate a way of imagining human relationships or the commonweal. In particular, I call attention to two kinds of narrative in which guns shape in part the way Americans envision their relations to fellow citizens. While one is more rhetorically developed than the other, I argue that both share a conception of social life where fear and violence are normal, and where others are configured as threats to our wellbeing.

In the first significant conception of “America,” guns are accorded a sacred status. Guns, their ownership, and use have become powerful symbols of what constitutes the United States as a distinctive polity. For instance, in a speech delivered to a large gathering of members of the National Rifle Association, spokesman Wayne LaPierre proclaims that the right of private citizens to own and operate guns provides a kind of basis or summary for all of the freedoms that mark out what it means to be an American. To infringe on gun rights, then, is to touch (and corrupt) all of the rights that together constitute the freedom of an American citizen. In this way, any effort to impose even very reasonable limits on citizens’ gun rights can be quickly painted as the work of America’s enemy par excellence—i.e., the out of touch government that wishes to rob us of all our rights, reducing us to slavery.

LaPierre situates these claims within a narrative that unfurls an ongoing battle in which a true, authentic America is depicted as the insurgent force, locked in combat with a more powerful, “false” America. The audience, he insinuates, are part of the “more than 100 million good Americans” who own guns (Disney 2015). He exhorts them to be vigilant for ongoing, albeit subtle, attacks from their powerful opponents. LaPierre reinscribes ordinary efforts through the law to make it more difficult to get the weapons required to carry out mass shootings

within an apocalyptic vision of Washington bureaucrats barging into private homes to confiscate the guns of responsible Americans.

Along with the strong rhetorical contrast of bad guys versus good guys, LaPierre portrays a society where everyone is “on his own” to stave off attack (Disney 2015). He thus links the image of a society composed of atomistic individuals who must secure their own right to live with an ethos of gun ownership. Gun rights set the stage for good guys to express virtues by being ready to defend what is theirs with guns. Yet, the narrative generates ironic tension as well. For instance, how, one wants to ask, does the idea of constant suspicion of one’s neighbors comport with the idea of a virtuous and free America?

In LaPierre’s image pitting good versus evil in a grand battle, it is easy to see a theological vision at work. Since the theology entails an account of virtuous behavior—namely, that of the good gun owner—it is a “theo-ethics.” In short, the good will be fulfilled when virtuous men and women prevail, vindicating paradigm of self-responsible liberty. From here on I will refer to this theo-ethics as “authentic America” because it is sustained by the narrative of reinstating and purifying America from corruptive forces. Yet the various reasons behind Americans’ decisions to purchase and use guns suggest fissures in the story this theology tells. Its reflection of our actual gun culture is tenuous and at best incomplete. To demonstrate some of the theology’s shortcomings, I will present two more ordinary examples of Americans buying and using guns.

The first portrait of the typical American who buys a gun comes from *The Armor of Light*. It is the story of a young, middle class couple with an infant child. The man is a lawyer and the woman appears to be staying home with their child. One day she came home with the child to find the apartment ransacked by thieves whom they deduce had left the premises only

minutes before they arrived. The event brought home to them a simple truth: they are vulnerable to being violated by other human beings.

Soon after this experience they bought a gun, which the lawyer identifies as a Glock 9 millimeter as he demonstrates how to hold it for the camera. He recounts how easy it was to lawfully acquire it in the state of Florida where he lives. The couple reports the decision to arm themselves as automatic. “We didn’t really discuss it,” one of them says. Rather the necessity, of getting the gun seemed so natural that it required no deliberation. “We weren’t going to be victims,” they report thinking at the time.

In other words, rather than a vision of dramatically reclaiming the authenticity of one’s country through virtue, the politics of gun ownership found in this typical American family stems from a jarring encounter with the truth of one’s vulnerability, together with a drive to empower oneself against this truth by owning a gun. This sequence reflects an underlying social vision that I will here call “the politics of strangers,” or simply “strangers” for short. It mirrors the vision of early modern political thinkers who imagined society in the form of the state as a conglomeration of individuals whose “interests” are essentially private and personal. Society, which is artificially imposed on the group of individuals, exists as a hedge against the potential aggression of the other. Fellow citizens are essentially threats to our wholeness, our very being as individuals. The prevalence of the politics of strangers within American gun culture gives the lie to the authentic America narrative insofar as it is rooted not in freedom but survival.

Another example of the politics of strangers in American gun culture comes from an illuminating piece by Evan Osnos in the *New Yorker* on the politics of the gun business. At the beginning of the essay, Osnos describes a standoff outside a night club in Philadelphia. Two groups of twenty-somethings have gotten themselves into a shoving match over some remark

that neither group could later recall. In one of the groups is a young man, Gerald Ung, in his third year of law school. Edward DiDonato, a graduate of Villanova University who was working for an insurance company, is on the other side.

Verbal sparring soon led to physical jabs. At one point, a certain young man from DiDonato's group lunged across the space separating the groups. Ung whipped out a tiny pistol he had purchased for self-protection. It was a weapon designed to be carried in concealment. At that point, DiDonato, apparently under the impression that the pistol was a toy or perhaps a BB gun, approached Ung with his arms spread, daring him to shoot. Ung fired six bullets into DiDonato's torso, leaving him crippled for life.

Osnos later describes how Ung came to the decision to become a gun owner in the first place. He recalled watching the nightly news and becoming increasingly alarmed about what seemed to be the increase in street violence. Whether or not this coverage accurately reflected the levels and types of crime in his community, they created in him the impression of increased vulnerability and made him increasingly anxious about becoming a victim himself. As for many gun owners, owning a gun became an obvious means of survival in a society of fear.

Fear in response to the truth of vulnerability signals the presence of the politics of strangers. It may seem from the examples that this politics fails to raise big picture questions of the sort invoked by authentic America. Osnos, however, provides a window into a deeper dimension of the politics of strangers when he describes the encounter between Ung and DiDonato immediately after the bullets were fired. On the tape of the 911 call, Ung could be heard talking further to DiDonato -- "Why did you make me do it?" The tragic nature of the question is worth pausing over. On one hand, it gives voice to what are taken to be law-like rules of the politics of strangers; if I use deadly violence, it is because I will be forced to do so by the

hostility of the other. These sorts of things are inevitable. Thus, what might seem to be ordinary fear has theo-ethical dimensions.

On the other hand, we hear in Ung's question an ambivalence which haunts the politics of strangers. Deep down he has a desire, perhaps as we'll see later a desire for friendship, at war with his construal of the other as threat to his well-being.

Above, I described the theological vision or narrative that supports the vision of an authentic America, symbolized by the freedom to own guns. And I have juxtaposed the politics of authentic America, with a more ordinary and even banal society of strangers, where guns become necessary for isolated individuals to protect themselves against fellow citizens they have learned to see as threatening—i.e. the politics of strangers. The examples of the politics of strangers indicate that authentic America does not offer a complete picture of why Americans seek to own guns. Indeed, neither politics does.

While I don't wish to claim that the authentic America vision can simply be reduced to the strangers one, or even assert that the former is nothing more than ideological overlay on the politics of fear, I do wish to point to some striking similarities between the two. Both, at bottom, trade on a negative account of human freedom as freedom *from* interference by others. And both imply a habit of seeing the other first and foremost as a potential threat to what I value (my own well-being in the case of the strangers model, and myself or an innocent third party in the case of authentic America). Now, admittedly, each projects a different image of the "other." Whereas in the politics of strangers the other is a mere individual like me but with whom I stand in fierce competition for survival; authentic America envisions a distinct and incommensurable people or way of life that threatens its identity. The other can be painted as left wing elements in America, or a more exotic community such as Muslims. While for the strangers outlook freedom is a kind

of default condition, for authentic America freedom is something achieved; though inherited it must be sustained and passed on.

We may at least say that the theological vision articulated by LaPierre of an authentic America neither adequately distinguishes itself from the politics of strangers nor provides a truthful account of why Americans have been arming themselves at alarming speeds. But what is more important for my purposes is the adoption of the authentic America narrative, together with its sacred symbol of the gun, by many American Christians. *The Armor of Light*, referred to above, reveals and explores the tension created within American Christianity by this arrangement.

Finally, the theo-ethics described above sheds some light on the stalemate between proponents and opponents of gun control in the U.S. Neither the arguments for greater regulation, nor those for greater liberty has adequate resources for discovering common ground. Both rest on an essentially atomistic picture of society, which always reverts back to individual preferences as fundamental.

Theo-ethics of Friendship

In unveiling the theo-ethics of guns in America, I have intended to make room for an alternative theo-ethical vision, which has its roots in the accounts of friendship developed by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. In presenting it here, I will also draw on theologian Herbert McCabe. As I will argue, Aristotle's view that the purpose of politics is friendship (*philia*) makes it crucially different from the politics of strangers described above. As a result, the Aristotelian perspective will allow me to reframe the debate about the morality of gun ownership and use. And yet

because Aristotle's account of friendship assumes the inevitability of violence, it cannot adequately confront America's theo-ethics of guns by itself. Therefore, I will push beyond it to Aquinas's conception of friendship as *caritas*, a love that participates in the character of God.

Aristotle envisioned societies (or *poleis*) in relation to an essential function or purpose. He assumed that belonging to a community was basic to human life as such. He had no substantive idea of being human, nor of human agency, that was prior to, and thus could be abstracted from, belonging and participation within a society. For Aristotle, the question of authentic human life and that of a rightly ordered community were of a piece and impossible to separate. Thus the function of societies was to make people good.

Further, in light of his essentially social understanding of society's function, Aristotle named friendship as the point and purpose of politics. Participating in friendship is how human beings grow in virtue, thus becoming capable of being members of a good society. Society (politics) is *for* friendship.

Though it is difficult for us as moderns, accustomed to thinking of friendship as a private matter, to comprehend, Aristotle's elevation of friendship shows his clear difference from the individualistic understanding of society familiar to the politics of strangers. Whereas the latter sees politics as a neutral means to gain what is desired by the private individual, for Aristotle participating in political friendship is partly constitutive of one's well-being.

How does this difference impact ethical judgments about guns? At one point in *The Armor of Light*, Rev, Rob Schenck, who is gradually coming to realize the pervasiveness of the mythology of guns among American Christians, remarks, "I hadn't realized how deeply guns figured in their thinking (Disney, 2015)." Guns, he saw, far from being indifferent tools, had become an encompassing force that shaped how American Christians saw reality, and especially

their vision of society. Similarly, in light of Aristotle’s focus on the common good, the basic ethical question now becomes whether owning and using guns promotes the conditions for a society’s growth in friendship. How, in other words, do the meanings guns have for us shape our vision of common life, of friendship? Does our possession and use hinder or help our society to carry out its essential function—namely, to nurture the kind of relationships, the ethical friendships, in which alone human agents individually and corporately achieve the flourishing proper to us? Having identified the importance of trust and solidarity, theologian Lyndon Shakespeare argues that assault weapons “fail to fit within a definition of human well-being [because] the use of such weapons is a piece of human activity that destabilizes the kind of human relations necessary for a political arrangement of friendship.”

Rules continue to play some role with an Aristotelian framework, but appeal to rules only becomes intelligible within a broader ethical frame generated by focusing on the need to articulate as best we may a conception of the good. Human cooperation provides the setting for a conception of human happiness. Herbert McCabe suggests seeing moral rules as something like the rulebook for a game or sport. Breaking the rules of a game regularly—for example, using your hands to direct the ball in a soccer game—signals that you are not really playing *this* game at all. Yet rules don’t tell you what playing well looks like; that is a matter of training and habituation (McCabe 2017).

While I agree with Shakespeare that it would be difficult to square Aristotle’s claim about the centrality of friendship to a good society with our contemporary practices of private gun ownership in America, Aristotelian friendship alone cannot subvert the theo-ethical assumption that violence is inevitable. For this, we must go beyond Aristotle to Aquinas’s account of friendship as “*caritas*.”

For Aristotle's friendships are at bottom exclusive and the societies of friends he imagines have definite boundaries. Those outside the polis—the society of virtuous friends—were to be seen as potential threats to virtue, to the good of friendship, enjoyed by those within. Aristotle's friendship thus pushes violence to the borders, but does not entirely subvert its role in shaping a theo-ethical vision. Christian ethicists Charles Pinches and Stanley Hauerwas argue that we can see the exclusiveness of Aristotle's friendship reflected in the fact that, for him, the paradigmatic act of courage was to die on the battlefield while fighting on behalf of one's city state (Hauerwas and Pinches 1997, 151–162). Violence in defense of one's shared identity was thus an inevitable part of reality. In this sense, friendship in Aristotle resembles the theo-ethical vision of authentic America, though the latter's conception of human agency and freedom are more rooted in the content-less liberty described above.

Thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas adopted Aristotle's conception of friendship in expounding the Christian moral life and also adapted it to the theological vision flowing from the narrative of Christian faith. In place of *philia*, Aquinas used the term *caritas*, whose primary reference is to the love Christians claim God has shown toward creation. Aquinas held friendship, *caritas*, to be the point and purpose of Christian life in community. He uses the term *caritas* because, he avers, Christians must recognize their friendship as fundamentally a *gift*. It is because God first befriended us that we in turn can learn to befriend one another (Aquinas, ST, II-II, Q. 23, Art. 1).

What difference does *caritas* make for a theo-ethics of guns? Shakespeare points out that the key to the Christian account of God's friendship is that its decisive embodiment revolves around the violence done to a human being. God's friendship is revealed in its finality in the life

of Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified at the hands of the religious and political powers of his place and time. So, one point of intersection with our topic is Jesus' violent death.

But the story of Jesus as told in Christian scripture does not end with the crucifixion but continues to narrate God's resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection expresses God's affirmation of Jesus and his life. It renders credible the identification of the life of Jesus with the character of God. Jesus's story contains the paradigmatic display of what God's love, *caritas*, looks like.

Hebert McCabe argues that the story of Jesus opens up new ethical possibilities for those of faith. While Jesus's death displays what must happen to someone whose friendship refuses to honor the necessities of exclusion and violence, the resurrection signals the outbreak of a new way of life, *caritas*, that transcends these necessities (McCabe 1968, 132-133). Shakespeare describes this dynamic eloquently, when he writes, "For Christians, the possibility of *caritas* is grounded in a violent act, but one that reorients the necessity of further violence through the creation and maintaining of a particular community of *philia* and *caritas*, the community of the church (Shakespeare, 617)." The reality of human violence is made real to us in the image of the crucified savior, but its inevitability is undermined by Christ's ongoing work in and through the community shaped by *caritas*.

My overarching point is that, in distinction from both Aristotelian friendship and the project of authentic America, Christian friendship refuses to accept violence as inevitable. The theo-ethical vision of *caritas* generates a community both called and empowered to transform the predilection for violence through the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. These ethical responses are made both possible and fitting or virtuous by living into friendship with God.

An implication is that Christian Americans who have adapted themselves to the theo-ethics of authentic America will find themselves caught in a contradiction that must produce

unbearable tension. The Christian theo-ethical vision inevitably conflicts with that of LaPierre and the NRA. While fear is at times appropriate for Christians, who rightly value their lives and relationships, something has gone awry when violence comes to be seen by them as a fact of life and one they ought to feel little troubled by. Because it is always open to human agents to try to transform enmity and hatred into union and love, an outlook which presumes violence is necessary must indicate a corrupted vision.

Incompatible Visions: Caritas and the Politics of Strangers/Authentic America

In this final section, I offer further support for the claim that the politics of caritas constitutes a rival and incommensurable theo-ethical vision to the politics of strangers and of authentic America. We see this in the tensions experienced by American Christians as they seek to wed a pro-gun stance to their ongoing commitment to the sanctity of human life. Again, my examples are drawn from the film *The Armor of Light*, and especially its chronicle of the journey of Rev. Rob Schenck from mainstream conservative activist to gadfly to his community for its complacency about gun violence. Schenck's story illustrates the normative status of *caritas* in Christian tradition both negatively and positively. We see in it both the doomed compromise of authentic friendship and the hope generated by the lingering virtue of truthfulness about the compromise. (This latter ultimately issues in repentance.)

Schenck's story as minister-lobbyist, as portrayed in the film, reflects a Christianity standing at arm's length from Aquinas's account of caritas, or friendship with God in Christ. One source of the conflict stems from the widespread adoption by Christian conservatives of the

individualistic assumptions of modern politics. Schenck is deeply indebted to Christian efforts to “outsource” politics to the state, a strategy that construes power as a mere means or mechanism for advancing individual/group interests. Schenck’s high-profile positions of power include chaplain to the Capital Forum Club (Described on Schenck’s Wikipedia page as the “only private association to meet regularly within the U.S. Capitol”), President of the National Clergy Council, and president of the conservative religious lobbying institute, “Faith and Action in the Nation’s Capital.” Further, the institute occupies elegant accommodations in a brownstone opposite the Supreme Court. Photos around the office show him leading a prayer with a group of politicians that includes Senator Ted Cruz, hobnobbing with members of the Supreme Court, as well as with Sarah Palin, who also appears in the film as a guest speaker at a rally of the NRA.

He is institutionally positioned to influence the directions of state power on behalf of a large and well-funded interest group. For someone so situated, “wise decision making” always begins by taking the pulse of opinion within the constituency. Thus he confesses with regard to “taking on the issue of gun violence” that a good friend and adviser has warned him solemnly to go slow with the issue, given the strong personal sentiments in favor of guns and second amendment rights of most conservative Christians in America. It is, in other words, a “hot button” issue in American politics, and he must be guided by the preferences of the people

The assumption behind this strategy of outsourcing politics is that the church must move beyond its own social life before it becomes properly speaking “political.” It needs a special instrument to become political. Thus, “friendship” for Schenck has become a means to power, rather than a way of embodying the telos of love. These assumptions are at the heart of modern individualism, which habituates us to fear the other. They result in participating unreflectively in the mechanisms of fear and violence.

Indeed, even as the movie documents Schenck's increasing awareness (and vexation) by the incoherence of the outsourcing arrangement, and the insupportable compromises of this strategy, he proves unable to rid himself of its key assumptions. So when it comes to raising the issue of Christians' relationship to guns in America, he finds he must frame the question as a "moral" and "theological" one *rather than* a political issue. The private (moral/theological) and public (political) distinction of modern individualism continues to inhabit his thinking, even as he tries to break free of it. Thus a key consequence of the Christian strategy that involves "outsourcing" politics to the state of is that the arrangement comes to seem natural.

In addition to displaying the American Christian adaptation to the politics of strangers and its individualist assumptions, Schenck's story reflects the dynamics of the theo-ethical vision of authentic America. The vision of an authentic America is perhaps an even more potent attraction to conservative Christians in America, and to his credit Schenck grows increasingly aware that it is a temptation. To review, the LaPierre narrative of an authentic America struggling to renew itself while under attack presupposes a cosmic struggle between clearly demarcated good guys and bad guys. Freedom and virtue are expressed in successfully battling—taking up arms—against the enemy. As a result, LaPierre's narrative projects violence as inevitable, and indeed as ennobling insofar as it expresses the will to renew America.

Schenck confronts the vision of authentic America in his Washington colleagues who argue that being pro-gun flows inferentially from being pro-life. The argument, made by Troy Normand (President of Operation Rescue), in a scene in a restaurant where Schenck has called together three associates to discuss the issue, is that a common goal is found in the defense of life that is innocent from an aggressor. But this kind of reference to innocence, it should be noted, relies on the LaPierre narrative depicting a world clearly divided between good guys and bad

guys. Normand reveals his captivity to this narrative when he leads in with LaPierre's signature line: "The only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." He goes on to paint a scene where an unbalanced individual enters a church and opens fire. That guy will be limited in the damage he can cause, he says, if someone like himself, armed and ready, is in position to respond. At this point, another colleague raises the question whether the government should at least require that those who wish to own guns first receive minimal training. Normand replies testily that he for one does not wish to aid the country's transformation into a "nanny state."

Picking up on his example, Schenck enters the fray by questioning whether Normand's confidence doesn't rest on a false view about how these events actually go down. Is this a world in which good guys are always easily picked out from bad guys? Indeed, are good and bad characters so easily demarcated in real people? And do would be heroes always find themselves possessed of the calm required to act well in crisis situations, rather than make matters worse?

Yet Schenck's story also reflects an increasing awareness of the tension engendered by the Christian absorption of the theo-ethics of strangers and the myth of authentic America. An exchange in another of his gatherings to discuss the alliance of Christians with the pro-gun agenda reveals this awareness. One of the leaders present articulates the view that, "If you took away guns, people would just find some other way of killing each other." The problem, she explains, is with the human will and laws cannot change that. Schenck pounces on this comment, seeing rightly that it is not merely hers but an argument that underwrites the bargain a large proportion of American Christians have made with the strangers/authentic America vision. "So," he says, "what we needed is Jesus...*plus*, a sidearm." He continues probing the argument's logic, "we need Jesus for the healing part, and if that fails, we need a gun to protect ourselves from the

sinner (Disney, 2015).” In other words, he is saying that under the guise of placing Christianity at the center, she has actually tightly circumscribed the role its vision can play.

In sum, Normand’s argument for an easy extension of pro-life principles to a pro-gun position expresses the compelling attraction of the theo-ethics of authentic America for conservative American Christians. His reference to the good guys/bad guys schema shows his absorption of the narrative element of struggle for authenticity, while his reference to a “nanny state” echoes LaPierre’s portrayal of the enemy as governing elites. He further paints this picture by stating that “an armed society is a polite society.” In other words, even should the society projected here reach its fulfillment, ceasing to be an insurgent force, violence would be a normal part of its functioning. Similarly, his second interlocutor relies on the narrative of authentic America with its positing of clearly distinguishable good guys and bad guys, saved and damned. She thus accepts, or reinstates, violence as a normal part of reality. As her comment shows, the myth of authentic America has enabled many Christians to keep the requirements of *caritas* out of sight.

Schenck’s story, then, at its self-questioning best, indicates where many Christians (himself included) have gone awry. That is, it begins to name the problem of Christianity’s adoption of the incommensurable visions of authentic America and the politics of strangers. At the same time, Schenck’s saga provides evidence of *caritas*’s normative status within Christianity, even when its refusal of the inevitability of violence is suppressed by Christians themselves.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the American gun culture is sustained by a politics of strangers, rooted in fear, as well as the myth of an authentic America. I have suggested reading these as theo-ethical visions—that is, as visions that orient human agents to a conception of the good through world-shaping narratives. Christians are deeply enmeshed in these theo-ethical visions. This theo-ethical vision gives rise to the debate over guns whose center of gravity is individual rights. Aristotelian philosophy breaks the stranglehold of individualism by imagining politics as ordered to friendship. To excel in community is to seek together the good life for human beings. Yet Aristotle’s account of friendship presupposes the inevitability of violence toward those outside the circle of friendship.

Christians in America live in a (false) peace with the theo-ethics of authentic America and its individualism. But this generates a profound tension with their ethical tradition, for I argued that Christian friendship purports to break the cycle of fear and violence by proclaiming *caritas*, or a love whose character is to overcome enmities. As a form of friendship, *caritas* proclaims that violence is not inevitable. To display the incommensurability of a theo-ethical vision rooted in *caritas* with that of both the politics of strangers and authentic America, I turned to Disney’s depiction of the story of Rob Schenck. The tensions and contradictions displayed in Schenck’s life, I claimed, reveal that the strategy of American Christians to make peace with a politics rooted in fear must fail.

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