

Firearms Fetishism in Texas: Entanglements of Gun Imaginaries and Belief

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Her family is incredibly conservative, to the point of ... guns are like God.¹

UT Austin undergraduate

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FIGURE 8.1 “God, Guns & Sons,” Madisonville, TX

- 1 Interview with the author, University of Texas at Austin undergraduate (Texas native), April 4, 2018, notes in possession of author. This study draws on interviews with native Texans (students, faculty, and staff at St. Edward’s University and The University of Texas at Austin) conducted in 2018 and 2019 by the Academy of Finland-funded Campus Carry research project at the University of Turku.

"GUN SHOP" read the sign, printed in big stenciled letters designed to catch the attention of passing cars on a rural Texas highway. The name of the business appeared beneath, a bit smaller: "God, Guns & Sons." Right there, on the vinyl banner of a roadside unregistered dealer captured in a colleague's snapshot, was a perfect juxtaposition of religion and firearms and masculinity, the very elements we had been discussing during a fieldwork trip to the Lone Star State to engage in research on guns.² The more I considered it, the more the sign appeared to epitomize a particularly Texan phenomenon, namely, fetishism of firearms. This chapter seeks to unpack the nature and the significance of that relationship, going beyond the most common perception of fetish as sexually related.³

In fact, fetish has a multiplicity of definitions. It can represent a religious power object, a type of relationship with material commodities, and/or an object of sexual fantasy. More specifically, fetishism is alternately theorized as: 1) a formative aspect of religion in proto-anthropology, 2) an aspect of commodification in Marxist philosophy, and/or 3) the outcome of an unresolved castration anxiety in childhood, according to Freudian psychoanalysis. Because there is significant crossover between these different definitions (as evident in the gun dealer's sign even), the fetish can be summarized as a complex locus of power, an assemblage that gains special value through the displacement of desire or meaning and thus becomes a source of reverence, fascination, or even worship.⁴

The transdisciplinary angle of fetishism allows this chapter to investigate the various connections that exist between religion and pro-gun attitudes in Texas. This is done, for example, by examining the recent passing of Senate Bill 535 in 2019, which allows open and concealed carry in places of worship. Support for this bill can partially be explained by mass shootings at churches in Texas, a predominantly Christian state, but also because religiosity itself is an

2 According to the Firearms Owners' Protection Act, a federal statute that regulates the sale of guns, those who only occasionally engage in trade or seek to add to or sell from their personal collection are not required to have a license. Since they are not required to conduct background checks on potential buyers or even document their sales, unregistered dealers operate in a grey area of the law. This may explain the temporary nature of the sign in the photo.

3 While fetishism of guns has yet to be studied in depth, for a discussion of representations in pop culture, see Roderick McGillis, *He Was Some Kind of a Man: Masculinities in the B Western* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009); see also William Settles, "Guns and ED: How American Men Are Proving That Freud Was Right," *The Restless Mind*, March 1, 2013, <https://wsettles.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/guns-and-ed-how-american-men-are-proving-that-freud-was-right/>, accessed May 1, 2021.

4 Tim Dant, "Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects," *The Sociological Review* 44, no. 3 (1996): 498.

important predictor of support for guns. Along with religion, guns are closely tied to cultural and ideological imaginaries related to frontier masculinity and individualism, and the development of fetishism may also be traced to a shift from rural gun culture to patterns of owning a firearm for self-defense. As the chapter will show, the social practices and ideologies of gun carriers combine with religious faith and praxis, leading to the gun simultaneously inhabiting multiple meanings that are integrally intertwined with identity and belief, and thereby serving as a mode of moral identity construction.

For their owners, guns not only have power as deadly objects and significance as imaginaries; power and significance are also found where these intersect in firearms fetishism. This study thus resists a purely ontological framing. Investigating fetishism does not ignore the real power of the object—the gun’s ability to take life foregrounds that—but instead it finds a shift in firearms’ perceived significance. This can happen either socially, as “a displacement of meaning through synecdoche,”⁵ or conceptually, by means of personal imaginaries. This is to say, firearms fetishism can play at the level of society (i.e., it may support collective recognition of the individual as a religious protector/masculine hero ideal) or on the level of the individual, informing their own moral self-understanding.

1 The Fetish and the Firearm

The long genealogy of the concept of fetishism finds its origin in the early theorization of the primary stage in the formation of religious belief, preceding monotheism. Writing *Du culte des dieux fétiches* in 1760 about Portuguese healers, Charles de Brosses argued that certain items have religious significance and are worshipped because of the powers they possess, being both supernatural and real objects that bridge the gap of the sacred and the profane.⁶ Although this interpretation already fell into disrepute in the Victorian era, vestiges remain in the study of religion and anthropology, applied to social theory as the magic that modernity could not destroy.⁷

5 Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism: A New Look* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), 45, cited in Dant, “Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects,” 498.

6 Stephen Böhm and Aanka Batta, “Just Doing It: Enjoying Commodity Fetishism with Lacan,” *Organization* 17, no. 3 (2010): 348.

7 Charles F. Springwood, “Gun Concealment, Display, and Magical Habits of the Body,” *Critique of Anthropology* 34, no. 4 (2014): 468; see also David Graeber, “Fetishism as Social Creativity: or, Fetishes Are Gods in the Process of Construction,” *Anthropological Theory* 5, no. 4 (2005): 407–38.

Fetishism found its next definition in the theory of Karl Marx, who compared man's relationship with commodities to the way in which in the "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world ... productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life."⁸ When Marx famously stated that a table was not just a table, he meant that it assumes a fetishized value beyond its status as a mere material object; in other words, to replace use value with exchange value is "to invest it with powers it does not have in itself."⁹ For Marx, exposing this relationship was key to his argument that the true significance lay in the human labor that created the object, rather than in the object itself. A hundred years later, Jean Baudrillard would advance this interpretation by using semiotics to define the commodity fetish, emphasizing its social value through an exchange of signs and meaning.¹⁰

The third definition of fetish emerged in the psychoanalysis practiced by Sigmund Freud. Here the fetish represents a penis substitute, created when a boy discovers that his mother's genitals lack what he himself has. Serving as "a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it,"¹¹ the fetish is understood to exert power in two ways: through substitution it forms an object of desire, which may be worshipped, or in the case of someone who has lost touch with reality, it leads to an unhealthy relationship and abuse.¹² Jacques Lacan and Wladimir Granoff advanced Freud's theory, making their own semiotic turn in 1956 (in a way that would influence Baudrillard) by moving beyond sexual substitution to a displacement of signs. In this interpretation, the fetish is not about the penis per se but a *symbolic* marker (i.e., phallus), an Other that cannot be attained because it is not *real*.¹³ As an *imaginary*, however, the fetish can fill this lack; through its symbolic power created and expressed through social relations, it transforms the anxiety that people experience into something they can believe in.¹⁴ After such displacement, a

8 Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress, [1867] 1954), 78.

9 Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 28.

10 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO: Telos, [1972] 1981), 75. See also Dant, "Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects," 504.

11 Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927–1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works* (London: Hogarth, 1961), 154.

12 Böhm and Batta, "Just Doing It," 350.

13 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (London: Tavistock, 1977).

14 Jacques Lacan and Wladimir Granoff, "Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real," in *Perversions: Psychodynamics and Therapy*, eds. Sándor Lorand and Michael Balint (New York: Random House, 1956), 265–76; Böhm and Batta, "Just Doing It," 352–56.

magical quality is added to an object, making it even more appealing to one's unconscious desire to become an ideal person, complete and self-actualized.

As a signifier, the gun operates on different levels, standing for something more than the literal object itself, informing ideologies and identity, a cultural representation of "American-ness" transmitted across generations. The gun is attributed power beyond its purely physical function, and by being treated as special it impacts the lives of those who treat it in that way. This fits the simplest definition of a fetish as an object with social value.¹⁵ It is not sufficient to remain with the simplest definition, however. Because the concept of fetishism is multivalent, the various interpretations—religion, commodity, and sexuality—need to be discussed sequentially but also as they intertwine.¹⁶

First, guns have a long history of being fetishized as a power object in association with religious traditions. Traditionally, for example, religion and hunting have been intertwined in the coming of age of boys in the U.S., also reflecting the relationship between gun culture and masculinity.¹⁷ This was reflected in an interview with a faculty member of St. Edward's University, who remembered his own rite of passage:

In fact, for my confirmation, what did my dad do? For my confirmation, I was in fifth or sixth grade, [and it was] the first time he let me go hunting by myself with a twenty-gauge shotgun. That was his reward for me being confirmed as a Catholic: "Now you can go hunting with your gun."¹⁸

Public policy writer Barry Bruce-Briggs found the same among Protestants, describing the ritual importance of receiving one's first gun at puberty, calling it "the *bar mitzvah* of the rural WASP."¹⁹ During this critical moment of identity formation, coming of age, and committing oneself to a spiritual community, masculinity and frontier tradition and religion intersect, comprising a complex of "becoming" that can be difficult to separate when examining the shift in gun culture.

¹⁵ See Dant, "Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects."

¹⁶ For an indispensable overview of fetish theory, see William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 5–17.

¹⁷ Gary Kleck, *Targeting Guns: Firearms and Their Control* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997).

¹⁸ Interview with the author, St. Edward's faculty (Texas resident since 1998), April 23, 2018, notes in possession of author.

¹⁹ Barry Bruce-Briggs, *The Great American Gun War: Notes from Four Decades in the Trenches* ([n.p.]: National Rifle Association, 1976), 41.

However, the so-called “Revolt in Cincinnati” in 1977 does represent a key watershed moment. Effectively a coup of the leadership of the National Rifle Association (NRA), this was the point at which the organization’s focus radically shifted from hunting and marksmanship to Second Amendment rights. Since then, the long tradition of recreational use of guns in the U.S., including sporting and hunting, has experienced significant decline; from 1977 to 2018, the percentage of households with adult hunters has fallen nearly by half.²⁰ Although not as dramatic in Texas, the share of hunters is trending down there as well, partly because of the drop-off in the number of children being raised in that culture.²¹

While it would be a category mistake to strictly separate “recreational gun culture” (e.g., sporting, hunting, collecting) found in rural communities from “defensive gun culture,” especially given that the individualistic frontier mentality includes elements of both, the overall decline in hunting and the rise in such gun behavior as concealed carry not only signal a change in reasons for firearms ownership but also a shift in the values associated with it.²² Tracking advertisements over more than six decades in *Guns* magazine, Yamane et al. have been able to demonstrate two distinct phases; following journalist Michael Bane, they call these Gun Culture 1.0 and Gun Culture 2.0. This shift pertains to firearms fetishism in different ways: an obvious manifestation is the overt commodification of guns in ads (see below), but there is a faith-related aspect as well. For this reason, Yamane et al. specifically point to the need for future research on the sacralization of the Second Amendment and guns, suggesting that Gun Culture 2.0 actually has fundamentally religious dimensions.²³ One way to trace this is through the changing rhetoric of the NRA.

Jessica Dawson has convincingly shown through textual analysis of *American Rifleman* (1975–2018) that the gun rights organization has a history of employing religious language to transform perceptions of the meaning of the

20 Violence Policy Center, “The Long-Term Decline of Gun Ownership in America: 1973 to 2018,” VPC, June 2020, www.vpc.org/studies/ownership.pdf2020, accessed May 1, 2021, 3.

21 Mike Leggett and Charley Locke, “Has Hunting Become a Rich Man’s Game?” *Texas Monthly*, October 2018, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/travel/hunting-become-rich-mans-game/>, accessed May 1, 2021.

22 On the frontier mentality, see Katarzyna Celinska, “Individualism and Collectivism in America: The Case of Gun Ownership and Attitudes toward Gun Control,” *Sociological Perspectives* 50, no. 2 (2007): 233.

23 David Yamane, Paul Yamane, and Sebastian L. Ivory, “Targeted Advertising: Documenting the Emergence of Gun Culture 2.0 in *Guns* magazine, 1955–2019,” *Palgrave Communications* 6, no. 61 (2020): 1–9. See also David Yamane, “The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 7 (2017): 1–10.

Second Amendment.²⁴ Examples of terms that gained increased importance include “God-given” (to refer to gun rights) and “evil” (as a force needing to be resisted through self-defense); furthermore, the battle for gun control has even been called a “holy war.” This was declared most impressively by the actor Charlton Heston, who was head of the NRA from 1998 to 2003 but also had religio-cultural cachet due to handing down God’s law as Moses in the film *The Twelve Commandments* (1956).²⁵ That the NRA saw itself as similarly disseminating dogma can be found in the words of the former CEO Warren Cassidy: “you would get a far better understanding if you approached us as if you were approaching one of the great religions of the world.”²⁶ In this regard, the role of the NRA accords with a perceived fusion of the secular and religious spheres, a binary imaginary of “America” comprised of dual creeds that intertwine in the special status provided by the First and Second Amendments.

For the faithful, such as members of the National Rifle Association’s Madison Brigade, belief in the freedom to keep and bear arms is concomitant with belief in the Constitution as divinely inspired and Second Amendment rights as “granted by God”; according to Scott Melzer, this view is aligned with the objectives of the Christian Right, whose battle against secular humanism is informed by “dominion theology” and the idea that the United States should be ruled by the faithful until Christ returns.²⁷ With guns being situated squarely in the holy nexus of religious nationalism, they comprise both the justification, the sanctioned means, and the fetish power object to defend the will of God.²⁸

In the NRA’s historically situated rhetoric, firearms assumed a new meaning as “totems mystically linking owners to their ancestors, and, even more important, to our collective American forefathers.”²⁹ In *Gun Culture 2.0*, the firearm

24 Jessica Dawson, “Shall Not Be Infringed: How the NRA Used Religious Language to Transform the Meaning of the Second Amendment,” *Palgrave Communications* 5, no. 58 (2019): 1–13.

25 Osha Gray Davidson, *Under Fire: The NRA and the Battle for Gun Control* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1998), 44; David Morgan, “Heston Urges Gun Owners to Vote for Bush,” CNN, October 18, 2000, <https://edition.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/10/18/heston.campaign.reuters/index.html>, accessed May 1, 2021. On the religious rhetoric used by Charlton Heston in support of the NRA, see Dawson, “Shall Not Be Infringed,” 7–8.

26 Scott Melzer, *Gun Crusaders: The NRA’s Culture War* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 15.

27 Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 121.

28 On Christian nationalism, see Andrew L. Whitehead, Landon Schnabel, and Samuel L. Perry, “Gun Control in the Crosshairs: Christian Nationalism and Opposition to Stricter Gun Laws,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 4 (2018): 1–13.

29 Davidson, *Under Fire*, 44.

“brims with symbolic power far beyond its physical utility.”³⁰ This aspect is succinctly expressed, for example, in an ingenious and religiously charged marketing slogan from the nineteenth century: “God created men. Colonel Colt made them equal.”³¹ But there are various other ways in which firearms can act as symbolic objects in a “gun cult” context.

According to Randall Collins, it is possible to differentiate three different spheres of activity in a person’s relationship with their firearm: individual (involving private behavior), communal (guns being the center of shared attention), and imagined (what one might do with the gun).³² As an example of the former, one can cite personal rituals involving the gun that extend beyond the merely functional.³³ An example given by Collins lends itself perfectly to the current discussion of fetishism: “the long hours that gun cultists spend on reloading ammunition suggests that this is a ritualistic affirmation of their membership, something like a member of a religious cult engaging in private prayer, in actual physical contact with the sacred objects, like fingering the beads of a rosary.”³⁴ In terms of the communal level, the association of guns with the First Amendment (as seen in the legal battle over carrying in churches) highlights their undeniable religious significance. Finally, regarding the imagined level, one can point to NRA fear messaging and gun culture eschatology. From the fictional trope of a “zombie apocalypse” to the much more proximal belief that the culture war in the U.S. will escalate into real war, gun ownership gains a “what if” mentality. With the transition of hunting and sporting culture (gun as tool) to constructed (in)security vis-à-vis a created Other (gun as fetish), the object is accorded a magical and literally apotropaic quality.

Second, the commodity fetishism of firearms also has a long genealogy in the United States. Since the nineteenth century at least, guns have provided an imaginary into which the common man can enter—they are a key part of the story sold to the people, where armed heroes defend their community and the nation. Writing on the historical significance of the gun fetish moving beyond merely material needs, Joan Burbick explains:

As such, it was more than anything else a springboard to a set of identities, a web of dreams, a way of knowing the self, emptied of everything

30 F. Carson Mencken and Paul Froese, “Gun Culture in Action,” *Social Problems* 66, no. 1 (2019): 3.

31 Larry Koller, *The Fireside Book of Guns* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 136.

32 Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 99.

33 See Abigail Kohn, *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America’s Gun Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54.

34 Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 101.

that got in the way of the urge to buy, and filled with the moral pap of nation building. By the end of the nineteenth century, the gun as a commodity was saturated in meaning.³⁵

As seen here, a network of discursive practices based on marketing existed well before the constructed imaginaries of Gun Culture 2.0. While advertising patterns in *Guns* magazine, for example, may have changed in the last fifty years, the values that people place in guns have been influenced through the management of images, symbols, and emotions for far longer. In this regard, the creation of the commodity fetish may follow a more cultural model than a materialist (Marxist) one.³⁶ Or it can be regarded as involving both through a two-part process:

The fetishism of commodities consists in the first place of emptying them of meaning, of hiding the real social relations objectified in them through human labour, to make it possible for the imaginary/symbolic relations to be injected into the construction of meaning at a secondary level. Production empties. Advertising fills. The real is hidden by the imaginary.³⁷

On this point, there is a big difference between a gun and the table discussed by Marx: imaginary meaning can be attached to the gun much more easily, being “a social object that incorporates subject positions, ideas as well as material form,” per Baudrillard’s understanding of fetish as the site where the subject and object may merge or be confused.³⁸ In practice, this allows marketing of gun imaginaries to extend beyond purely profit-driven agendas to political and social ones with a potentially dramatic impact on personal and shared belief, including religious worldview.

Third, coming at last to the sexual interpretation of firearms fetishism—dating back to Freud’s famous statement that “all weapons and tools are used as symbols for the male organ: e.g. ploughs, hammers, rifles, revolvers, daggers, sabres, etc.”—the phallic significance of guns cannot be ignored.³⁹ Indeed,

35 Joan Burbick, “Cultural Anatomy of a Gun Show,” *Stanford Law & Policy Review* 17, no. 3 (2006): 662.

36 Yamane et al., “Targeted Advertising,” 3.

37 Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising*, 51. Original italics removed.

38 Dant, “Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects,” 504.

39 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume V (1900–1901): The Interpretation of Dreams (II) and On Dreams* (London: Hogarth, 2001), 357.

this connection has explicitly been made in recent gun debates.⁴⁰ In Texas, for example, student activists in the Cocks Not Glocks group at UT Austin made international headlines in 2016 with protests against Campus Carry that juxtaposed sex and violence, using dildos (outlawed in public) to make a statement on the normativity of (legally) carrying firearms. The group's graphic Twitter logo (Figure 8.2) illustrates the semiotic power of the gun as penis.



FIGURE 8.2 "A well armed populace is the best defense against fear" (2016)

Rhetorically as well, the students conflated the two. Most famous perhaps was their inversion of the historic challenge from the "Come and Take It" of the Battle of Gonzales in 1835 to "Take It and Come," here referring not to the famous cannon but the free sex toys they were handing out.⁴¹ Other slogans employed similar sexually charged double-entendres: "You are packing heat, we are packing meat,"⁴² "Time to be hard-on gun culture,"⁴³ and "The larger the Glocks, the smaller the cocks."⁴⁴ The last of these barbs is particularly poignant, highlighting a common perception that guns act for men as compensation for a lack of virility or strength. Not only does this directly remind of Freud's fetish, but it also targets the idealized ability of a man to stand on his own. For example,

40 This rich subject has also been dealt with elsewhere. On the priapic theory of guns, see, for example, Don B. Kates, "Gun Control: A Realistic Assessment," Pacific Research Foundation, April 15, 1990, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2953370>, accessed May 1, 2021; Susie McKellar, "Guns: The 'Last Frontier on the Road to Equality'?", in *The Gendered Object*, ed. Pat Kirkham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 71–79.

41 For more on the Gonzales cannon, see Laura Hernández-Ehrisman in this volume.

42 Interview with the author, University of Texas at Austin undergraduate (Texas native), April 4, 2018, notes in possession of author.

43 @CocksNotGlocks. Twitter, November 12, 2016, <https://twitter.com/CocksNotGlocks/status/797218783597248512>, accessed May 1, 2021.

44 @sfclm, Twitter, August 24, 2016, <https://twitter.com/sfclm/status/768525086282383362>, accessed May 1, 2021.

when William Settles writes that “the gun cult is rooted in fantasy ... unique to the American experience,”⁴⁵ he specifically connects the gun fetish to a decline in male virility and the false promise of success through individualism. Fieldwork among gun owners shows that this is not far off the mark, for they admit that loss of the firearm symbolizes a loss of one’s power as a male, and such feelings may be even more pronounced in cultural contexts where the rugged masculinity and heroism so endemic to the frontier imaginary of the Southwest are prevalent.⁴⁶ For example, referring to a mother not allowing her son to use guns, the author of *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (2001), a popular book in conservative Protestant circles, baldly exclaims: “That is emasculation.”⁴⁷

In multiple ways, therefore, firearms fetishism today can be seen as supporting the realization of an imaginary that had not necessarily been possible before, at least in Lacan’s interpretation of it as a lack, symbolic of fused phallic and consumerist desire:⁴⁸

As an object, the gun exists as something we imagine will satisfy us; its existence is more imaginary than real. ... As children, we were our cowboy heroes, just as we could never be those heroes. The gun was both object and subject in that it represented something separate, desirable, and in a real way unattainable, while at the same time it was an extension of ourselves.⁴⁹

Today, the gun/hero imaginary—the gun and the hero being fused through desire—is no longer unattainable in the United States. Through the fetish, the desire to become a hero can be fulfilled; the gun is a hero-maker, not just *in potentia* but in actual practice. This can be seen in the cases described below.

45 Settles, “Guns and ED.”

46 For a discussion of guns and hegemonic masculinity, see Angela Stroud, “Good Guys with Guns: Hegemonic Masculinity and Concealed Handguns,” *Gender and Society* 26, no. 2 (2012): 227–30.

47 John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 65, cited in Samuel Stroope and Joshua C. Tom, “In-Home Firearm Access among US Adolescents and the Role of Religious Subculture: Results from a Nationally Representative Study,” *Social Science Research* 67 (September 2017): 140.

48 With its discussion of signification, Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory extends Freud’s differentiation of the penis and the “phallic,” as one can be possessed and the other cannot; see Lacan, *Écrits*.

49 McGillis, *He Was Some Kind of a Man*, 73–74.

2 Guns in the Church

On November 5, 2017, gunfire sounded from the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Stephen Willeford, a local neighbor, ran from his house to investigate—barefoot but armed with a trusted AR-15. He yelled as loud as he could, drawing out the lone shooter who had already killed 26 people and injured 20, and then wounding him. When the man sped off, escaping the scene, Willeford flagged down a passing truck and gave chase until the gunman drove off the road and shot himself.⁵⁰

Stephen Willeford has been called a “good guy with a gun.”⁵¹ Having put his own life on the line to save others, he exemplifies the famous statement made by NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre after the Newtown, Connecticut school shooting in 2012: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”⁵² Willeford became an instant hero in the local community but also for gun rights advocates nationwide—he met President Trump and was featured in a NRA commercial. There are also religious dimensions to this story. For some, Willeford’s actions on that fateful day transcend a merely worldly context. A gun manufacturer from San Antonio, for instance, gave him a special new AR-15 to replace the one not returned by the police.⁵³

On one side of the assault weapon is the flag of Texas, on the other a passage from the New Testament: “For he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”⁵⁴ The symbolism here is multivalent. On one hand, it exemplifies a tradition of adorning firearms with biblical quotes as a fetishistic attempt to make the weapon holy;

50 Michael J. Mooney, “The Hero of the Sutherland Springs Shooting Is Still Reckoning With What Happened That Day,” *Texas Monthly*, November 2018, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/stephen-willeford-sutherland-springs-mass-murder/>, accessed May 1, 2021.

51 Joe Holley, *Sutherland Springs: God, Guns, and Hope in a Texas Town* (New York: Hachette Books, 2020). For a discussion of the cultural concept of a “good guy with a gun,” see Stroud, “Good Guys with Guns,” 216–38.

52 Peter Overby, “NRA: ‘Only Thing That Stops A Bad Guy With A Gun Is A Good Guy With A Gun,’” NPR, December 21, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/25/782705313/guns-america-the-good-guy-with-a-gun>, accessed May 1, 2021.

53 In the end, the police did return Willeford’s assault rifle in a ceremony at the First Baptist Church, where he now attends services.

54 Romans 13:4. While this passage stands out from the New Testament’s non-violent message and portrayal of Jesus Christ as the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6), the Old Testament contains numerous instances in which exceptions to the Sixth Commandment are made for the faithful; see Jacques van Ruiten and Koert van Bakkum, eds., *Violence in the Hebrew Bible: Between Text and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

see, for example, the controversial engraving of verse numbers (cf. John 8:12, 2 Cor. 4:6) on the gun sights of rifles used by the U.S. military.⁵⁵ On the other, these words construct its wielder as both a Texan and a divine agent, a dual identity which resonates with Willeford himself. Indeed, in an interview a year later, he framed the shootout as a battle between good and evil, in which he was protected by God against the bullets directed his way, while the Holy Spirit helped him to remain calm. Reflecting back on growing up with guns and shooting since he was only five years old, Willeford felt that the Lord had been shaping him his whole life for that day.⁵⁶

Along with the imaginary of the “good guy with a gun” becoming actualized, the tragedy of Sutherland Springs importantly provided Texas legislators with the political capital they needed to pass Senate Bill 535, which in 2019 removed “a church, synagogue, or other established place of religious worship” from the list of excluded places where a licensed person might carry a firearm, open or concealed.⁵⁷ This came as glad tidings for those congregations who wanted citizen protectors in their pews, and it also represented a victory for those who argued that the Second Amendment—namely, that the right of the people to bear arms shall not be infringed—extends to sacred space. Again, the debate was framed in terms of a battle between good and bad. As Texas State Senator Donna Campbell (R), co-sponsor of SB 535, explained: “We have learned many times over that there is no such thing as a gun-free zone. Those with evil intentions will violate the law and carry out their heinous acts no matter what.”⁵⁸ This statement reveals a twofold ordering on the part of the gun owner: on one hand, the borders between types of space are erased; on the other, different types of people are delineated.

SB 535 signaled the independent streak of the Lone Star State as willing to break with a longstanding tradition of churches being off limits to weapons. This has been the case with the Catholic Church, for example, which for centuries has offered sanctuary to those fleeing violence, reflecting a collective agreement in society that hallowed ground is off-limits to acts of aggression.⁵⁹

55 Erik Eckholm, “Firm to Remove Bible References From Gun Sights,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/22/us/22guns.html>, accessed May 1, 2021.

56 Mooney, “The Hero of the Sutherland Springs Shooting.”

57 Texas, Senate Bill 535, 2019, <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/86R/billtext/html/SB00535F.htm>, accessed May 1, 2021.

58 Donna Campbell, “Texas Legislature Passes SB 535 to Secure Texans’ Right to Carry in Church,” Donna Campbell M.D., May 21, 2019, <https://www.donnacampbell.com/texas-legislature-passes-sb-535-to-secure-texans-right-to-carry-in-church/>, accessed May 1, 2021.

59 Lauri Scherer, ed., *Gun Violence* (Farmington Mills, MI: Greenhaven, 2013), 92.

In Texas, however, while the law does allow a church to forbid firearms if it gives “effective notice,” Catholic dioceses other than El Paso and Dallas chose to let their individual parishes decide how to proceed, reflecting the ideological differences between conservative and liberal congregations. While Protestant denominations also differ on this issue, for some evangelical strands, guns even comprise an integral part of their faith.

In recent years, gun rights proponents have argued that the First Amendment’s protection of the free exercise of religion should allow them to carry in church. Waging battles in court to this end, they have not only cited a “sustained and sincere tradition” of carrying but also that “the right (if not the duty) of self-defense is well established in Christian theology.”⁶⁰ Highlighting the difficulties in separating religious identity from cultural heritage, William B. Bankston et al. note in their study on guns, “Especially in a traditionally southern population, religion, as also ethnic identity or geographic location, is likely a surrogate measure of cultural heritage.”⁶¹ This complex relationship has put the judicial branch in the difficult position of needing to determine the practical implications of belief vis-à-vis gun imaginaries. For example, when several people along with a guns rights organization and Baptist church in Georgia brought a case to the Eleventh Circuit to overthrow a state law prohibiting firearms in places of worship, the court upheld the ban, ruling that “there is no First Amendment protection for personal preferences.”⁶² In its view, the plaintiffs failed to sufficiently demonstrate the theological basis for their claim (e.g., having a religious duty to carry, like a Sikh with a *kirpan* knife) or that their worship was hindered by not having a gun.⁶³ In the history of the United States regarding what deserves legal protection, there is a large divide between religious belief and religious behavior, with the latter being much more subject to regulation.⁶⁴ I would argue, however, that gun imaginaries represent a point of intersection between belief and behavior, and SB 535 in Texas was accordingly able to challenge such strict divisions.

60 John M.A. DiPippa, “God and Guns: The Free Exercise of Religion Problems of Regulating Guns in Churches and Other Houses of Worship,” *Marquette Law Review* 98, no. 3 (2015): 1123.

61 William B. Bankston et al., “The Influence of Fear of Crime, Gender, and Southern Culture on Carrying Firearms for Protection,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1990): 302n1.

62 *GeorgiaCarry.org, Inc. v. Georgia*, 687 F.3d 1244, 1255 (11th Cir. 2012), cert. denied, 133 S. Ct. 856 (2013).

63 For the argumentation around the parallel of Sikh boys being allowed to carry knives to school for religious reasons, see Brian Leiter, *Why Tolerate Religion?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

64 On this point, see Catherine Cookson, *Regulating Religion: The Courts and the Free Exercise Clause* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

The new gun law was put to the test two years after the tragedy of Sutherland Springs, when a drifter entered the West Freeway Church of Christ in the suburbs of Fort Worth and opened fire with a shotgun. In this instance, people were ready. At least seven parishioners drew on him and less than six seconds later, he lay dead on the floor, having been taken down by Jack Wilson, a firearms instructor and “security volunteer.”⁶⁵ The passing of SB 535 had led to a very different outcome than in Sutherland Springs, and the validation of the law further cemented the powerful gun imaginary of the “good guy with a gun.” This narrative was picked up by gun rights proponents, as well as by politicians nationwide. Notably, President Trump tweeted, “Lives were saved by these heroes, and Texas laws allowing them to carry arms!”⁶⁶ Pronounced agency of the hero—inevitably male—thus came to accompany the shift in gun culture, from gun as tool to gun as fetish. The power of the gun gained additional significance through its immediate proximity (being legally available where it had not been before), yet it also benefited from the fetishistic affordances given to it—as an item with religious status, as the epitome of consumer culture, and as a reinforcement of masculinity.

The hero-making role of the gun is clearly seen in the stories of Stephen Willeford and Jack Wilson, whose heroic defense against church shooters won them national recognition and praise. Even outside of a church context, such a selfless act of protecting their community would have likely still led to their being considered a “good guy with a gun.” In Texas, however, the Christian frame made their moral status and heroic identity even more unequivocal.

3 Texas as a Nexus of Guns, Religion, and Moral Identity

To better understand firearms fetishism in Texas in particular, it is necessary to analyze more closely the relationship of guns and religion there, not as a universal but specifically in terms of different faiths. Texas is a very religious state with a Christian majority. According to a 2015 Pew survey, more than half of Texans identify as either Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, or Historically Black Protestant, while nearly another quarter are Catholic. Although

65 Montgomery et al., “Inside a Texas Church, Guns, Bibles and a Spirited Firearms Debate,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/30/us/texas-church-shooting-fort-worth-white-settlement.html>, accessed May 1, 2021.

66 @realDonaldTrump, Twitter. December 31, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1211813523581546496> (account since suspended), currently available at <https://www.thetrumparchive.com>, accessed May 1, 2021.

there are Texans who belong to other spiritual traditions, they are in the minority, and only 18% said they had no religious affiliation—half the number of “Nones” found in Vermont, for example.⁶⁷ This religious landscape provides critical context for the cases discussed above, and it points to the broad level of support for SB 535. The church shootings happened in a place that was familiar to most Texans.

Notwithstanding the manifold expressions of personal belief within any given faith, the connection between gun ownership and Protestantism—especially in the South and Southwest—has been proven by scholars.⁶⁸ Already in 1989, Robert Young revealed that religion has an explanatory force when it comes to support for guns, along with such cultural factors as a heritage of frontier mentality and childhood socialization with firearms, especially common among Protestants; in addition, he cited the popularity of hunting among adherents of that religious faith.⁶⁹ Based on data from the 1984–1998 waves of the General Social Survey (GSS) on guns, Katarzyna Celinska was further able to show that Protestant affiliation independently predicts gun ownership.⁷⁰ And more than a decade later, analyzing a subsequent set of GSS results (2006–2014), David Yamane confirmed that religious fundamentalism is a significant factor, with evangelical Protestants being the most likely segment to own guns.⁷¹

67 “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>, accessed May 1, 2021.

68 While attention is paid here and in the following discussion to differentiate between the South and the Southwest, with Texas being considered part of the latter, it is important to note that this identity is also a creation and rebranding effort by the state. See Light Townsend Cummins, “History, Memory, and Rebranding Texas as Western for the 1936 Centennial,” in *This Corner of Canaan: Essays on Texas in Honor of Randolph B. Campbell*, eds. Richard B. McCaslin, Donald E. Chipman, and Andrew J. Torget (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2013), 41.

69 Robert Young, “The Protestant Heritage and the Spirit of Gun Ownership,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 3 (1989): 300–9; Celinska, “Individualism and Collectivism in America,” 229–47.

70 Celinska, 232.

71 David Yamane, “Awash in a Sea of Faith and Firearms: Rediscovering the Connection Between Religion and Gun Ownership in America,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 3 (2016): 622–36; see also Stephen M. Merino, “God and Guns: Examining Religious Influences on Gun Control Attitudes in the United States,” *Religions* 9, no. 189 (2018): 1–13. However, generalizations about evangelicals supporting gun ownership also need to be problematized; for debates within the faith, particularly between generations, see Eliza Griswold, “God, Guns, and Country: The Evangelical Fight Over Firearms,” *New Yorker*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/god-guns-and-country-the-evangelical-fight-over-firearms>, accessed May 1, 2021.

After Campus Carry law (SB 11) was passed in Texas in 2015, surveys have also revealed a correlation between religiosity and opinions on gun ownership around that specific issue. In polls conducted among Austin residents by the Texas Politics Project and the *Texas Tribune*, those who attended religious services more often were more likely to support guns on campus.⁷² The same was found among undergraduates at UT Austin, the vast majority of whom were Texas natives: those who supported Campus Carry attended religious services more often and were also more likely to consider themselves religious. In addition, one in ten went so far as to assert that this position was informed by their religious beliefs.⁷³ Given the broad range of quantitative research, it is thus safe to conclude that religiosity is integrally connected to patterns of gun ownership.

Yet, regarding the relationship of guns and religion, with both offering empowerment and protection, one might ask if they are mutually exclusive. For example, if a person's faith is strong, how necessary is it for them to own a gun? Focusing precisely on the emotional and moral force gained from firearms, F. Carson Mencken and Paul Froese answer that sociological processes, including economic distress, are actually more significant than religion in shaping attitudes toward guns.⁷⁴ In other words, guns can give meaning and a feeling of empowerment for certain individuals in an acute situation—particularly white men in financial precarity—as they struggle with “a lack of connection to other sources of existential meaning.”⁷⁵ According to their data, “high levels of religiosity decrease gun empowerment among gun owners suggesting that religious commitment offsets the need for meaning and identity through gun ownership.”⁷⁶ A lack of granularity in the Baylor Religion Surveys (2013) that Mencken and Froese studied prevents such a conclusion, however. For

72 “The University of Texas / Texas Tribune Poll Cross Tabulations,” The Texas Politics Project at The University of Texas at Austin in Conjunction with the Texas Tribune, June 26, 2015, https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/sites/texaspolitics.utexas.edu/files/201506_poll_crosstabs.pdf, accessed May 1, 2021.

73 The survey of UT Austin undergraduates (N=1,204), conducted by the Campus Carry research team in spring 2019, was representative of that population in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and fields of study. For more results, see Sampo Ruoppila and Albion M. Butters, “Not a ‘Nonissue’: Perceptions and Realities of Campus Carry at The University of Texas at Austin,” *Journal of American Studies* 55, no. 2 (2021): 299–311.

74 Mencken and Froese, “Gun Culture in Action.”

75 Mencken and Froese, 23. On the rhetoric of guns to defend frontier masculinity, linked with the breadwinner mentality, see Melzer, 25–43. On challenging economic circumstances affecting gun attitudes among men, see Jennifer Carlson, “Mourning Mayberry: Guns, Masculinity, and Socioeconomic Decline,” *Gender and Society* 29, no. 3: 386–409.

76 Mencken and Froese, 18.

although they probed overall religiosity (i.e., how often one attends worship, how religious one considers oneself), they did not consider the specific religious faiths of the respondents, and Christian denominations can differ widely in their attitudes around guns. For instance, when Catholic Bishop Kevin Farrell (Diocese of Dallas) excoriated the “cowboy mentality” supporting the legislation to allow open and concealed carry of guns in churches, there was considerable backlash from evangelical Protestants.⁷⁷ Another relevant difference between Protestantism and Catholicism is that the former tends toward individualism and the latter is more institutionally coercive. Considering that the religious freedom set forth in the First Amendment has a strongly Protestant bent, it would not be surprising if the ideology surrounding gun ownership shared a similar character.⁷⁸ Accordingly, the rugged individualism of the so-called “cowboy mentality” of Texas can be seen as running deeper than a frontier imaginary alone, also reflecting intersections between one’s religious and moral worldview and the perceived right to keep and bear arms.

As demonstrated in the legal discussion above on the theological basis for allowing firearms in church, there are challenges in separating religion from cultural heritage.⁷⁹ It is important to remember not to view religious as private and secular as public. To separate the two, to engage in the boundary-making exercise of the modern that creates artificial bifurcations and “has served as a mystifying ruse masking the undifferentiated cultural realities always in play,” is to miss both their complex intertwining and the fact that they are constantly in motion.⁸⁰ Just as cultural forces may be present in the habitus of the gun itself—that is, the shared social norms and dispositions surrounding the object—religious aspects can be found as well. These are not necessarily solely based on religion per se, but a complex nexus of meanings (e.g., the hero ideal, moral status as a protector). The fact that religion is increasingly recognized as a diffuse category does not mean that things do not play a religious function, especially in modern social imaginaries.

Beyond the clear delineations of faith outlined above, particularly concerning the connection between evangelical Protestantism and attitudes toward guns, another helpful lens for the discussion can be gained by employing a

77 Peter Feuerherd, “Dallas Bishop Condemns Texas’ Gun Carry Law, Prohibits Guns in Worship Spaces,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 14, 2016, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/dallas-bishop-condemns-texas-gun-carry-law-prohibits-guns-worship-spaces2016>, accessed May 1, 2021; see also Michael W. Austin, *God and Guns in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020).

78 Randall Styers, “Religion and Cultural Theory,” *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 1 (2013): 74.

79 Bankston et al., “The Influence of Fear,” 287–305.

80 Styers, “Religion and Cultural Theory,” 72–79.

more discursive study of religion. Aimed at exploring the construction of meanings, this approach reads texts, theory, rhetoric, and fieldwork data in a way that challenges existing definitions of religion as a pre-established category. In this case, therefore, “religion” is understood as an empty signifier in the sense that it is historically, socially and culturally constructed and negotiated in various situations.”⁸¹ Thus, while the religious landscape of Texas always needs to be kept in the background, it is critical to also leave open the possibility of emergent forms, especially given the dynamic nature of gun culture. An example of this may be found in the moral significance of firearm fetishism, which finds support within the Christian worldview but is not limited to it. While seen in the cases above on gun-wielding protectors of churches, for example, the construction of a moral identity around guns is not limited to sacred space. Instead, it is dependent on a broader range of underlying forces and beliefs, which in turn are linked to gun imaginaries.

The first and simplest of these is the concept of the “good guy with a gun,” the hero ideal discussed above, which has been promulgated by the NRA and through pop culture. Second is the sense of “moral right” afforded by the Second Amendment to own a gun, tied to the Christian worldview of those who wrote the U.S. Bill of Rights and the militia of the American Revolution being exemplarily upstanding.⁸² Third, the hero imaginary of the frontier could be mentioned. With Gun Culture 2.0, all these forms combine, such that specific social groups have appeared to find in guns a new source of “moral purpose.”⁸³ In times of potential lack or loss, white males in particular may rely on an emotional and moral connection with the gun as symbolic power, with the semiotic force of the cultural symbol helping to define and support one’s identity. As Mencken and Froese explain, “It is these social contexts that trigger a need for moral meaning and an attraction to frontier gun mythology; they also ultimately determine an American’s perception of guns and their importance to self and society.”⁸⁴ Thus, the moral aspect of gun imaginaries needs to be understood in multiple ways, in terms of both historical and cultural contexts,

81 Teemu Taira, “Making Space for Discursive Study in Religious Studies,” *Helsinki Study of Religions: A Reader* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2016), 74. On the term “empty signifier,” used in semiotics to refer to a word or concept that has floating meaning and may be appropriated in various ways, including in the service of religion or its theorization, see Michael Bergunder, “What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014): 264–66.

82 Stroud, “Good Guys with Guns,” 218.

83 Mencken and Froese, “Gun Culture in Action,” 24.

84 Mencken and Froese, 3.

nationally but also in relation to Texas in particular, with continuing negotiations around gun culture.

Gun ownership implies—and, legally speaking, demands—a social contract. In addition, it is attended by moral expectations, often set by religion. Since perceptions of firearms by Christians in Texas have been shown to be favorable overall, there tends to be communal support for a person to have one, especially when they are socially embedded among others who are doing the same. As Collins notes about ritual, “The individual feels moral when he or she is acting with the energy derived from the heightened experience of the group.”⁸⁵ Phenomenologically speaking, it is worth highlighting that the gun owner *feels* moral when carrying—and for many, this would not happen if their religious worldview did not support it.

Yet, the instrumentality of the gun can play a role in this feeling as well. For example, gun carriers told Jennifer Carlson in the field that “they believed they had become *better people* because of their choice to carry guns.”⁸⁶ On one hand, this belief may be predicated on individuals being able to protect their loved ones and society at large; the literal power of the fetish item gives moral empowerment. On the other, the fact that the fetish has actual power reinforces its credibility as a talisman, which needs to be kept close, if not on one’s body. But is it accurate to consider the gun a religious object?

Other than some rare examples in which ministry and worship do revolve around firearms (e.g., Pastor Hyung Jin Moon’s “Rod of Iron” church), there is insufficient evidence to support such a claim.⁸⁷ Moreover, while more widely one hears of gun cults, this term refers only to the social practices involving firearms; guns themselves do not promise any divine reward. Indeed, it is the immanent quality of the fetish, relevant in daily life rather than some undetermined soteriological future, which benefits the person holding it.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the gun resists interpretation as a religious object per se, unlike the Muslim’s *hijab* veil or the Sikh’s *kirpan* knife, which are clearly linked to demonstrations of faith.⁸⁹ For this reason, it is perhaps more accurate to locate firearms fetishism in relation to gun imaginaries, not the gun itself, operating

85 Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 39.

86 Carlson, “Mourning Mayberry,” 402. Italics in the original.

87 Tess Owen, “We Spent a Wild Weekend with the Gun-Worshipping Moonie Church That’s Trying to Go MAGA,” *Vice News*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xwep53/we-spent-a-wild-weekend-with-the-gun-worshipping-moonie-church-thats-trying-to-go-maga>, accessed May 1, 2021.

88 Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising*, 56.

89 Cf. Qur’ān 24:31; Guru Gobind Singh’s command to the Sikh community in 1699 regarding “the five Ks.”

in a mutually sustaining framework of belief. Such a relationship is not without precedent throughout history. For example, if one considers the sword of the medieval knight made holy for the Crusades or the samurai's *katana* blessed by Shinto priests, they were special precisely because of their relation to religious mores—namely, chivalry or the Bushidō code of honor.⁹⁰ The weapon is what helped the warrior be what he needed to be in order to fulfill his moral duty and hero imaginary. This same type of entwinement is arguably taking place today in Texas with gun imaginaries, with guns gaining religious significance in the process.

David Graeber understood the fetish as midway between magic and religion. Following Émile Durkheim's view that the former is concerned with the aims of the individual and the latter with society, the power object appropriated for oneself entails powers also being imposed in relation to the social bond.⁹¹ Simply put, along with the gun comes moral responsibility. By sanctioning the gun, which will always remain a threat due to the liminal nature of its potential use in either sacred or profane ways (e.g., righteous defense versus murder), society subverts its power from the personal and harnesses it for the collective. The same process can be said to take place when firearms are allowed in church. The gun is conceptually transformed from an object that takes life to one that saves lives. In this manner it becomes sacrosanct, per Durkheim's sociology of religion, which defines as one of the functions of ritual the honoring of an object that has social value, in order to make it sacred or to ensure that such a status is maintained. If for Durkheim the principle of the sacred is a transfiguration of society and its blessings are the morals that society affords, the sacred quality of the gun for its owner—its fetish value—is realized in the moral character its imaginary inculcates.⁹²

This can be explained in a way that better clarifies the relationship between morals and religion per se. In his discussion of modern social imaginaries, Charles Taylor makes the pragmatist argument that they have been possible through a process of secularization and disenchantment, a shift from the normative discourse of a religious worldview. Due to what Taylor calls the "great disembedding," religion has been forced to operate and assume new forms in a profane world, taking a "different place."⁹³ As a consequence, "the ways

90 Derek A. Rivard, *Blessing the World: Ritual and Lay Piety in Medieval Religion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 160–63.

91 Graeber, "Fetishism as Social Creativity," 427.

92 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, [1915] 1995), 358.

93 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 49–68, 194.

people imagine their social existence” are simply moral, based on a collective agreement of how to behave.⁹⁴ Gun imaginaries—as a modern social imaginary—can thus be seen in alignment with the neo-Durkheimian “modern moral order”⁹⁵ as much as any purely religious one. For many Texans, however, the distancing from religion is a problem. In a debate with Beto O’Rourke, for example, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) blamed the increasing trend in school shootings on “removing God from the public square.”⁹⁶

Indeed, differentiating between moral systems exposes a tension in belief systems, with guns situated at the core. According to Max Weber’s theory of disenchantment of the world, modern scientific inquiry and technology are privileged over faith and religion.⁹⁷ While personal claims to religiosity can certainly be maintained, in their retreat one finds a shift of prioritization of religious agency from the transcendental to the immanent, the domain in which firearms are operative. As a hinge between competing imaginaries, the gun simultaneously disenchants and enchants. It is made of cold steel, and yet it stirs strong emotions. Writing on the magical quality of guns “as an enchanted assemblage of performance, control, omnipotence, pleasure, and fear,”⁹⁸ Springwood resists a purely Weberian interpretation, noting that “despite advancements in science and technology, practices in contemporary society remain wholly enchanted by imagined force(s).”⁹⁹ This brings us full circle back to fetishism, whose complex theoretical frame is able to encompass these apparent contradictions:

Here magic is modern, having never faded in the shadow of modernity, always saturating the technologies of science and of the state, not to mention capitalist fetishism. Perhaps magic is what links desire to fetish, both of the Lacanian and the Marxist sort.¹⁰⁰

94 Taylor, 23.

95 Taylor, 3–22.

96 R. G. Ratcliffe, “Cruz and O’Rourke Confident in First Debate, But Was There a Clear Winner?” *Texas Monthly*, September 22, 2018, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/ted-cruz-beto-orourke-first-debate-contentious/>, accessed May 1, 2021. On guns as a response to the moral decay of the Christian nation, see Whitehead et al., “Gun Control in the Crosshairs,” 2.

97 Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 155; see also Terry Maley, “Max Weber and the Iron Cage of Technology,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 24, no. 1 (2004): 69–86.

98 Springwood, “Gun Concealment,” 452.

99 Springwood, 455.

100 Springwood, 448.

In the end, the formation of moral identity through firearms may be sociocultural, religious, or based on a new modern moral order. At the risk of teleology, however, the point here is not the exact nature of the cause but the way in which in it is expressed. Fusing power and signification in a moral context, the idealized hero is the manifestation of firearms fetishism, embodying the relationship between gun imaginaries and the gun itself.

4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the ways in which gun imaginaries have taken form through various types of firearms fetishism in Texas. Outlining the state's religious landscape with a historical view toward shifting gun cultures, it has shown a range of gun-related expressions of Christianity and their significance in the formation of moral identity. In relation to alternative theoretizations of fetishism, guns have also been examined in terms of commodification and masculinity.

The religious and ideological landscape of the United States—and Texas in particular—is changing. Attrition in church membership, especially among the younger demographic, calls into question the transmission of the core values of Christianity—or at least it signals an increasing gap in worldviews. At the same time, even as ongoing urbanization and the decline in hunting suggest a continued generational turn to Gun Culture 2.0 of owning a firearms for the protection of oneself and others, legislation has passed to allow constitutional carry in Texas; this means that gun owners will not need a permit to holster firearms in public, either concealed or openly. How will these changes affect the moral component of gun ownership? Will young new heroes fill the shoes of Stephen Willeford and Jack Wilson?

This difficult question can perhaps be addressed through a final consideration of the three interpretations of firearms fetishism comprising the focus of this study. Because at the level of religious or magical power the fetish item is fundamentally intertwined with moral significance, it is hard to imagine a complete rupture of certain gun imaginaries (like the “good guy with a gun”) from societal mores. As long as vestiges of the hero ideal remain, even in the face of individualist tendencies the fetish will generally be directed to the benefit of the collective. The danger of a rupture lies in the overextension and shifting of the gun imaginaries themselves (e.g., beyond the gun having value as a tool or even a cultural symbol). This can be described in terms of Baudrillard's “loss of the real,”¹⁰¹ whereby, at a certain point, there is a risk that what the

101 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: SAGE, 1976).

gun used to represent will be replaced by a simulacrum of its own existence. Here, fear of the government coming to take one's guns, such as fomented by ideologues like Alex Jones broadcasting out of Austin, can also signify a fear of gun imaginaries being censored by "woke" culture. One could therefore ask if threatening a gun owner's identity entails a risk of also threatening the moral order built upon it.

In terms of consumerist firearms fetishism, gun sales in Texas are up, and there is every reason to believe that the trend will continue in its current dramatic fashion. In practice, this means a larger gap between the "haves" and the "have nots." Because attitudes on gun ownership tend to be predicated on strong ideological divides, which are often expressed through othering rhetoric, this does not bode well. When buying a gun is linked to being a "good American,"¹⁰² it sets up a morally difficult situation regarding those who do not own a gun, who are not "good." Following this particular gun imaginary to its natural conclusion along ideological lines, one ends up with two Americas. This differs significantly from fifty years ago, of course. When asked about divides around gun ownership in Texas in the past, a professor at St. Edward's University in Austin confessed, "I don't remember it in my childhood being as much of a concern either way."¹⁰³ This is not the case today.

Loss of the real can also be seen in the shifting gun imaginary of the frontiersman, whose relationship with his firearm was inextricably linked to ideals of self-sufficiency, masculinity, independence from the state, and rule over nature.¹⁰⁴ With nature having ever-decreasing relevance, the other aspects have gained more importance. In gun control debates that center around conflicting visions of "American-ness," tending either more egalitarian or more individualistic,¹⁰⁵ values of individualism are an ever clearer predictor for gun ownership and attitudes.¹⁰⁶ In practice, the protection of the gun owner may be limited to their defined community, whatever that means in the face of increased tribalism. Drawing on a heritage of defiance in the face of potential loss, the gun imaginary of the Alamo may be rhetorically conjoined with threats of martial retaliation: the individualist strain of "don't mess with Texas" still stands as a warning to not mess with Texans' guns. Potential loss is also at the core of the sexual interpretation of the gun fetish. In the context of "us

¹⁰² Mencken and Froese, "Gun Culture in Action," 7.

¹⁰³ Interview with the author, St. Edward's faculty (Texas native), April 26, 2018, notes in possession of author.

¹⁰⁴ James D. Wright, "Ten Essential Observations on Guns in America," *Society* 32, no. 3 (1995): 69.

¹⁰⁵ Dan M. Kahan, "The Gun Control Debate: A Culture-Theory Manifesto," *Washington & Lee Law Review* 60, no. 1 (2003): 6.

¹⁰⁶ Celinksa, "Individualism and Collectivism in America," 229–30.

versus them” polarization, this aspect has special relevance for the male gun owner. Defending one’s guns is a way to maintain hegemonic masculinity in a time of gender precarity.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, when the nature of the idealized (gendered) hero is called into question, increased semiotic importance may be attached to gun imaginaries.

Entangled with ideology and identities, the ontological gerrymandering between modern social imaginaries and a loss of the real opens the door for multiple possible futures—both negative and positive—from increasing insulation and individualism to insurrection under the guise of patriotism to a reconciliation of differing worldviews. In the worst-case scenario, fear of the government coming to take one’s guns can lead to a self-fulfilling apocalyptic prophecy, as seen in the siege of Waco, Texas in 1993. At the other extreme, with gun imaginaries informing and being informed by moral behavior, it is possible to hope for a more integrated outcome, where civil debate between different communities may account for shared concerns for security, and the increasing trend toward individual self-protection does not eclipse the ethos where the interests and safety of the collective are of greatest import. Given the future unknowns around the moral component and signification of gun ownership, fetishism offers an important theoretical lens to illuminate the complex dynamics of power and belief surrounding firearms going forward as well.

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