

A REFLECTION ON GUNS AND GOLDEN CALVES

Stephanie Y. Mitchem

The perpetrator of mass murder, Dylan Roof, sat for about an hour in a Bible study before he pulled out a gun and killed nine people on June 17, 2015. Roof reportedly stated: “I have to do this.” This is obviously an abbreviated version of the horrific murders in a black Charleston, South Carolina church, but I want to sharply focus on that church hour with the victims informed by the compulsion to “do this” with a gun.

The Charleston occurrence is a uniquely United States’ incident on several levels, particularly in the contexts of guns. Those contexts are critically important; it is not just *this* gun or *this* person or *this* event. Reducing complex, lived realities and social theories into single anecdotes is, at best, anti-intellectual. However, the reductions of our realities happen everyday, between hearsay and the many forms of media. We become used to the quick and easy answer that resolves nothing. Such reductions also assisted in constructing the formational environment that nurtured a Dylan Roof.

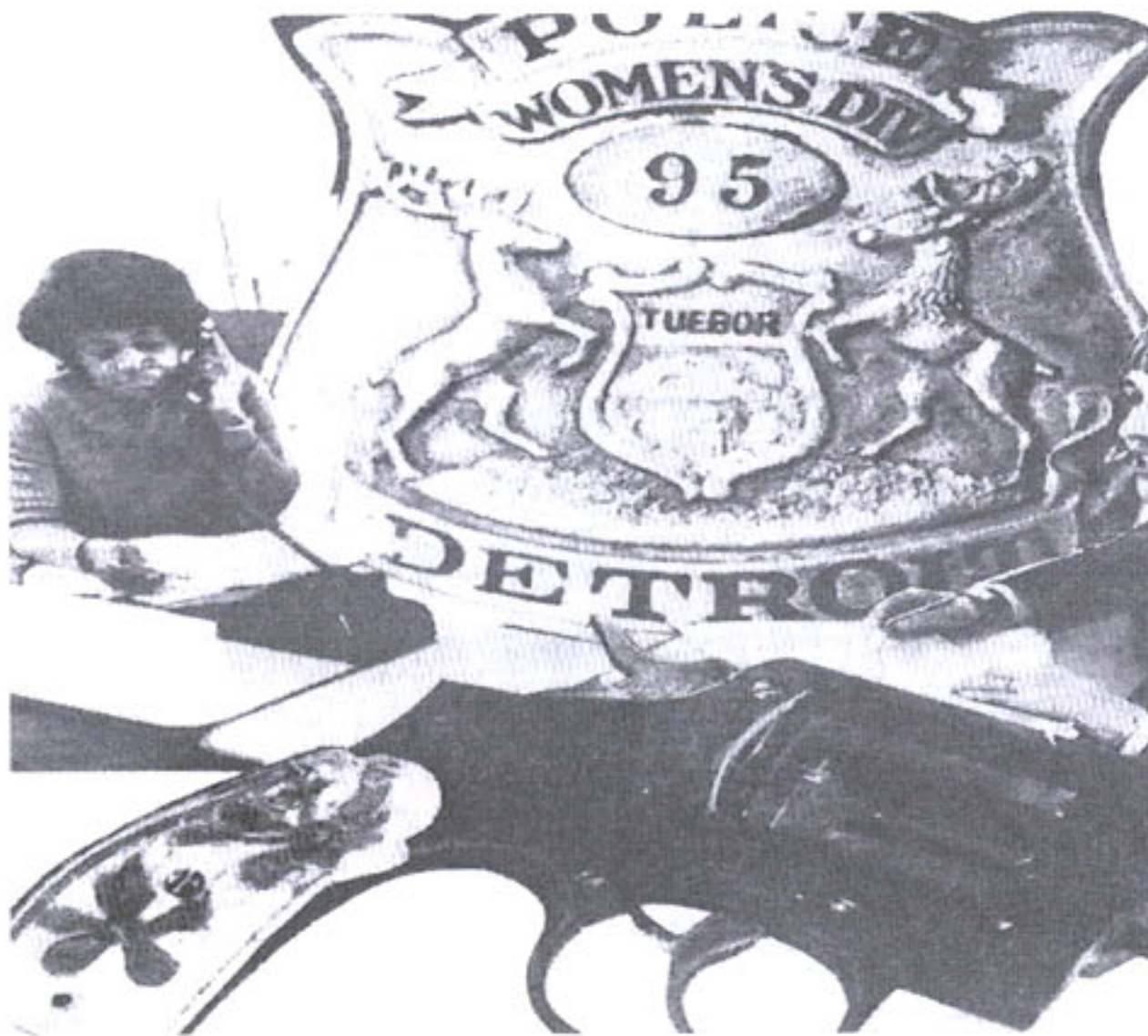
And the guns I reference are not those needed for farming or hunting or wanted for sport, like various rifles. Instead, the guns of cities, of high-density population areas, are handguns and assault weapons, turning war against other humans into a new pastime.

These pastime guns can be seen as a contemporary, falsely worshipped, golden calf of the United States. The “golden calf” I reference is from the decades-old Cecil B. DeMille production of *The Ten Commandments*. That old movie version of a biblical story is fully Americanized and commercialized, fitting our capitalistic framework very well. The movie not only creates a version of the Bible, but it creates a version of Jews—

Hollywood Hebrews—whose identity revolved around being the oppressed others and being slaves for the Glam Egyptians (Yul Brynner!), with a bit of religion thrown in.

The villain was Edward G. Robinson who strutted about in full gangster mode; the Robinson character (no, such is not in the Bible) was the genius promoter of the golden calf, while Moses (aka Charlton Heston) was busy talking to God. The calf was composed of everybody's gold melted down (Slaves with a bunch of gold? A smelter in the desert?) The "worship" was complete with dancing girls in scanty costumes not meant for rough desert climes but well suited to a Vegas hotel. The glitzy DeMille version detracts from the message that the real evil is found in people who want to create their own version of god, a version that is a controllable thing bringing comfort to the delusions of any who believed.

I contend that guns have become like a golden calf, a version of religion in many places in the United States. Guns are commercialized, given justification through laws and blessed with an idea of "rights." At the back end, the truth is: Guns define power as the real god, one that is controllable of other people's bodies and thinking, deluding the believer into a sense of self-righteousness.



Lest you think I am just hateful about guns, I need to state here that I was raised in a household with guns. My mother was a police officer in the former Women's Division in the city of Detroit. She taught her kids solid rules for handling guns. (The cop mom with the revolutionary daughter is a different story for another day.) The photograph above is from a 1971 *Detroit Free Press* article, "When There Are Posies on the Pistol."¹ It was my mother's weapon. Women's Divisions had been established to "handle" crimes involving women and children. These old divisions ultimately were found by the courts to discriminate against the women police officers because of different pay and different entrance requirements. But having a division that focused on women and children could have made a difference in the lives of today's 12-year-old Tamar Rice playing in a park in Cleveland, OH, with a toy gun or the 14-year-old girl slammed to the ground by a white officer for suspiciously attending a pool party in McKinney, Texas. During my mother's time, though, there were a variety of attitudes about guns, from Al Capone style gangsters, to the manly myth of John Wayne, to my mother's attempt to construct a less threatening view (It really didn't work; as soon as her supervisors saw the story, they had her remove the "posies" as non-regulation).

At that time, the roots of contemporary gun worship were firmly in place with John Wayne viewed as heroic and, conversely, the Black Panthers' Huey Newton as an anarchist. At that time, in the prequel to the Ferguson-Baltimore-Cleveland police activities, structured oppression and anti-black violence were well underway. Detroit's 1967 rebellion (also known as riots) began with a SWAT team style police raid on a large party where liquor was illegally sold. The hard-core militarization of police departments had begun. The blue codes of silence that keep police pitted against civilians were in force across the country, then as now. The idea that the first order of policing is to protect property, not people, had not become as central to police work; hence, the gun with pressed flowers intended to reduce fear in the children picked up by the Women's Division.

These old stories provide important contexts to understand today's new and updated gun worship. My equivalency of DeMille's calf and contemporary gun worship may seem like an awkward stretch, but disparate pieces of fact and fiction came together without the aid of a single Edward G. Robinson villain to craft the new form of worship.

Today, we have fantasies about American ideological roots. Witness the ongoing arguments about what should be in high school history advanced placement courses between the conservative National Association of Scholars and the less conservative College Board.² Or the persistent and deep cuts to higher education funding, most recently in Wisconsin.³ Why the interest in controlling the ideas of history, of identifying the “greatness” of the US without the blemishes? Fantasies do not live well in sunlight. A national fantasy that reduces American history to jingoism benefits certain social classes (not any poor) and certain races (not any colored). Fantasies that ignore colonization and cruelty begin to fold concepts of justice into the materiality of power. So mainstream American rights and American values become defined by limited portions of society that assume their massive social privileges are divinely bestowed. And to keep this view alive, guns are necessary enforcers.

Certainly, there are different ways to think about guns. In one view, guns are tied to freedom, as in the 20th century painting by the artist Jacob Lawrence, “Forward.” That painting is part of a series about the Underground Railroad during American enslavement, capturing the idea of the Underground Railroad Conductor, the Moses, named Harriet Tubman. Legend has it that one of the many black escapees that she helped to go from the South to the North, became fearful and wanted to turn back. Tubman pulled a gun on this person and said to go “forward” or die, because a returning escapee would endanger all of those freedom seekers. Yet, there are other stories that show guns as providing the freedom to create the United States; the idea of Manifest Destiny—the United States as stretching across the continent, regardless of who lived there at the time—would not have happened without a lot of firepower and governmental support.

Religions have had a part in these different views of weaponry. Over American history, theologies have been constructed that justify enslavement, lynching, eugenics, and nuclear war. “God is on our side,” some profess. Such theologies generally comfort the comfortable rather than challenge the status quo and so the privileged are the chosen ones. Calvinism has been used to construct ideas of who is evidently saved by their ownership of goods. Money and power are fully wedded. The popularity of prosperity religions brings money and power right out into the

open in these churches; the golden calf is embedded in their midst and guns are the necessary enforcers.

Recent ideas popularize these connections. Tying guns to limited views of American rights and values again brings in religions, especially American Christianities; this is the beating heart of the golden calf construction. The bumper sticker “God, guns and guts made America free” was sold at gun shows for several years. But one recent presidential candidate penned a book entitled *God, Guns, Grits and Gravy*,⁴ upping the cuteness factor of flag waving, patriotism, and guns.

The cuteness of the new golden calf of guns is an important dimension of the public’s acceptance of guns’ inevitability in our society. During the Christmas season of 2014, billboards began appearing around the Columbia, South Carolina area. In one, a festive Christmas stocking was hung over a decorated fireplace; the stocking served as a holster for a handgun. There were no sexy models, just the stark contrast of handgun in a Christmas scene. Another billboard showed a cheery Christmas scene with a decoratively wrapped rifle prominently displayed under the tree with other gifts. The billboards are meant to sell guns as gifts. But irony is built into the ads: Fears of a war on Christmas with a “keep Christ in Christmas” slogan just doesn’t seem to fit well with guns under Christmas trees.

As I worked on this essay, I had several people read through and respond to the ideas. Conrad took my arguments to another level when he stated: “Churches have functioned as a tool of the powerful to control the masses through deeply manipulative, emotionally traumatic threats. Humans share one driving force with all organisms, the drive for sex. By defining a very limited and unnatural sex life for men, there’s a massive reserve of energy to be directed to production and consumption and the consolidation of wealth and power.” And in his view, guns and other things that blow up become ways to release (pun intended) repressed sexuality.

Not only cuteness and repressed sexuality, but political arguments about second amendment rights to bear arms are used to justify carrying guns. The invitation to be one of the good guys to stand against the bad guys is its own kind of calf-seduction. From my mother’s day of mixed messages to this present moment, guns become a blessed technology to enforce righteousness. So, it is only natural that we begin to think about guns in churches.

After a series of car thefts, Pastor Haman Cross Jr. has encouraged some members to get concealed weapon permits. As Cross stated: “I love the Lord; I’m a Christian. . . . But like I told the congregation, let’s send a message right in front. I want the word out in the community, if you steal any of our cars, I’m coming after you.”⁵

The problem of guns in church is vexing to many Christian denominations. A Mennonite church document argued human safety versus the call of the gospel:

One option we have not advocated here—that of allowing just anyone with a concealed weapon permit to carry a weapon. Pause just a moment and ask yourself, ‘If there are many people in my congregation carrying weapons and something occurs, am I confident that each of them will make sound, correct decisions, and the end result will be something I can live with?’ Making the wrong decision in a crisis can quickly make a bad situation worse.⁶

Despite the state of Georgia’s Safe Carry Law, guns are not permitted in Episcopalian places of worship. As Bishop Robert C. Wright of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta wrote in a pastoral letter in April 2014: “My judgment and this policy are based on the normative understanding of the teachings of Jesus as the Episcopal Church has received them. This matter and I hope this policy afford us yet another opportunity to live the words we pray each week.”

But these quiet words have not impacted the fervor of those worshipping the golden calf of guns, with a cobbled-together ideology of divine freedom, license, and proof of righteousness. God, guns, and grits are more interesting than some theological arguments.

And so I wonder: Has the gun become an established technology of religion? We use underlying justifications with self-proclaimed righteousness and zealotry about guns. We have code words that are intended to terminate conversation: American, freedom, cuteness, and religion. This time, the golden calf comes with levers and firing pins. This time, the calf can force compliance to give up your money, to stand your ground, to promise retribution, or to prove superiority.

How do we get rid of golden calf worship in America? How do we turn to an idea of worship tied to justice, not coercion, not force, not demon-making? Still waiting on the Charlton Heston type character to

show up and toss down exploding tablets? No, that's just another form of force. I think this time we will have to decide to skip the calf on our own, to develop moral courage, and walk another path.

Notes

1. Eileen Foley, *Detroit Free Press*, October 31, 1971, E-1.
2. https://www.nas.org/articles/the_new_ap_history_a_preliminary_report
3. "When the dust settles, Wisconsin could be looking at the largest cut in the country. The state is facing a potential \$150 million cut in state funding for the UW System each of the next 2 years." Karen Herzog, *Milwaukee-Wisconsin Journal Sentinel*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/wisconsin-one-of-few-states-taking-up-higher-education-cuts-b99499306z1-305300501.html>
4. Mike Huckabee, New York: Macmillan, 2015.
5. "More African-Americans Support Carrying Legal Guns For Self-Defense," Martin Kaste, <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/02/396869889/more-african-americans-support-carrying-legal-guns-for-self-defense>. April 02, 2015
6. From "Guns in Churches, Addressing Church Security Needs," July 2013, mennonitemutual.com.