

Gun control as a religious issue

by [David Gibson](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue

Of all the controversies that have followed in the bloody wake of the July 20 shooting rampage in Aurora, Colorado, few have provided such clarifying insight into the moral tensions and contradictions in American culture as the argument over whether gun control is a religious issue.

James Martin, an author and Jesuit priest, was among the first to set out the terms of the debate when he penned a column for *America* magazine arguing that gun control “is as much of a ‘life issue’ or a ‘pro-life issue’ . . . as is abortion, euthanasia or the death penalty (all of which I am against), and programs that provide the poor with the same access to basic human needs as the wealthy.”

Martin’s central point was that abortion opponents spare no effort to try to shut down abortion clinics or to change laws to limit or ban abortions, so clearly believers should be committed to taking practical steps to restrict access to guns.

“Simply praying, ‘God, never let this happen again’ is insufficient for the person who believes that God gave us the intelligence to bring about lasting change,” Martin wrote. “It would be as if one passed a homeless person and said to oneself, ‘God, please help that poor man,’ when all along you could have helped him yourself.”

The debate is as intense today as it has been after every gun massacre, but it hasn’t changed the dynamics of the issue for believers or politicians. It may not this time either. Within hours of posting his views about gun control as a religious issue on Facebook, Martin had to shut down comments on the page because of the vitriol his views provoked.

Still, the Jesuit’s views were echoed by an array of religious voices and groups who also called on Christians and other believers to advocate for policies to curb gun violence, with some putting the exhortation in an explicitly antiabortion context.

“It’s time to say that unregulated availability of assault weapons is clearly antilife,” said Sherry Anne Weddell, codirector of the Catherine of Siena Institute in Colorado Springs. “It’s time for pro-life people to take a stand.”

Frank Pavone, head of Priests for Life and an antiabortion activist generally associated with the religious right, made a similar point. “Anyone concerned about protecting human life has to be concerned about the misuse of guns, and of anything else that can become a weapon against the innocent,” Pavone said in an interview. “It’s the same as Mother Teresa’s famous quote, ‘If we tell a mother she can kill her own child, how can we tell others not to kill each other?’”

There was vigorous counterargument, however, that followed two main tracks. One was to resist any public policy prescriptions and debates as beside the point—or worse, to see them as inappropriate political exploitation of a tragedy. The second was to see the gun control debate as a distraction from a spiritual and theological focus.

Wrote Mark Galli, senior managing editor of *Christianity Today*, the flagship evangelical magazine, in an essay dated July 23: “We are kidding ourselves if we think we have within our national grasp an educational or psychological or political solution to evil. There is no solution [to] or explanation for evil.”

A number of other prominent conservative Christians, like Rep. Louie Gohmert (R., Tex.) and former Arkansas governor and Southern Baptist minister Mike Huckabee, took that view a step further and argued that it wasn’t just the mystery of evil but also the nation’s self-inflicted spiritual wounds that led to the massacre.

“We don’t have a crime problem, or a gun problem, or even a violence problem. What we have is a sin problem,” Huckabee said July 22 on his Fox News show. “And since we’ve ordered God out of our schools and communities, the military and public conversations, you know, we really shouldn’t act so surprised when all hell breaks loose.”

On one level, this debate seems to represent a classic theological divide: there are those who argue that human beings should not try to supplant God’s role with their own efforts to redeem the world, and there are others who argue that believers have a duty to protect the God-given gift of life and human dignity.

On another level, however, the dispute illuminates the current realities of America’s political and religious life. In fact, Americans of all persuasions have become increasingly opposed to gun control laws, despite the regular shooting rampages that have targeted houses of worship as well as movie theaters and military bases.

No surprise, then, that in his initial remarks on the Colorado shooting, President Obama—who might be seen as a champion of the “religious left”—has resisted calls to mention gun control and instead counseled the nation to realize that “such evil is senseless.”

Later, in a speech July 25 to the National Urban League, Obama said he wanted a national consensus in the effort to stem gun violence. Despite the Second Amendment’s protection of gun rights, Obama said, “I also believe that a lot of gun owners would agree that an AK-47 belongs in the hands of soldiers, not in the hands of criminals—that they belong on the battlefield of war, not on the streets of our cities.”

The next day, as Congress passed a resolution condemning the Aurora shootings, the *Los Angeles Times* said even leading Democrats trod carefully around the issue of gun control. “We all recognize the importance of the Second Amendment and also the need to reduce violence in our communities,” said Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

Complicating matters politically is the fact that conservative Christians who form the bulk of the antiabortion movement are less enthusiastic than almost everyone else about gun control.

In an essay on the Patheos website that asked “why Christians aren’t bringing the same dedication to talking about guns as we do to other issues, notably abortion and homosexuality,” Ellen Painter Dollar recalled her effort to write a piece for *Christianity Today* in the wake of the January 2011 shooting of then-congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and several others.

Dollar said she “gently” raised the issue of gun control in the piece, but the editors spiked it because “they felt they ‘cannot win’ on the gun-control issue with their evangelical readership.”

Another challenge is that many conservatives see opposing abortion rights as the paramount issue today, and adding anything to that agenda could hurt the cause and divide the movement.

“Our convictions about the dignity of women and children harmed by abortion ought to prompt us to stand against criminal violence and dehumanization wherever it is. But we ought not to let the term ‘pro-life’ become so elastic as to lose all meaning,” warned Russell D. Moore, a well-known Christian ethicist and dean of theology at the

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

“In most cases, the expansion of ‘pro-life’ is a way to divert attention from the question of personhood and human rights,” Moore wrote in an e-mail. —RNS