

CTS Board Statement on Gun Violence June 1, 2023

“Then the Lord asked Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He answered, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’ God then said: ‘What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground!’” (Genesis 1:9-10)

*“They shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
One nation shall not raise the sword against another,
nor shall they train for war again.” (Isaiah 2:4)*

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear...” (1 John 4:18)

Over the last five years, the United States has faced an unprecedented surge in gun violence. This surge has resulted in the deaths of nearly 100,000 persons in the last five years alone.¹ Many of these deaths have resulted from mass shootings, the number of which has nearly doubled since 2016.² In 2023, over 200 mass shootings had occurred as of May 1.³ These statistics include a sharp increase in the number of children killed by gun violence.⁴ Analysts report that gun violence is now the leading killer of children in the United States, with more children dying from gun violence than motor vehicle accidents or cancer.⁵ The scale of this violence has led many commentators to name gun violence a “pandemic” of our own making, with partial responses and a lack of political will allowing this violence to continue unchecked.⁶

The College Theology Society (CTS) understands these deaths as the deaths of persons made in God’s image with an inalienable dignity and the right to flourish as beloved children of God. This understanding challenges CTS members—as scholars committed to reading the “signs of the times” in the light of the Gospel proclamation of love and peace—to use our expertise to account for and address the structural roots of gun violence. Silence and indifference are not options. We must speak and act, denouncing social and ideological forces that fuel gun violence and diminish human life, and announcing a radical message of peace. The CTS calls itself and all its members to use whatever resources we possess—as scholars, teachers, ministers, and activists—to shed light on the causes and effects of gun violence and foster a praxis of life that interrupts and seeks to end this terrible reality.

¹ <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

² <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/> According to the Gun Violence Archive, there were 383 mass shootings in 2016, compared with 647 in 2022.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/mass-shootings-2023.html>

⁴ <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/> - The gun violence archive defines mass shootings as shootings in which at least people are killed.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/14/magazine/gun-violence-children-data-statistics.html>

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<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2023/01/26/monterey-park-half-moon-bay-shooting-gun-violence-pandemic/11104515002/?qnt-cfr=1>

The reality of gun violence and the lack of will to end it is founded on a logic of violence and domination that results in “the material destruction of human bodies and populations.”⁷ This system, which Pope John Paul II denounced as a “culture of death,”⁸ operates by *enabling* violence to continue in ways that inject fear into spaces of everyday life—in shopping malls, places of worship, social gatherings, and schools—and perpetuates a false narrative that the solution to gun violence is *more guns* and *more violence*, fueling the industry of gun manufacturing and sales, as well as the gun lobby that so often dominates American political life. We denounce this system, its logic, and any association of this system with the Christian faith—especially associations made in the name of white Christian nationalism, which is utterly antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.⁹

Echoing Pope Francis’s words on the death penalty, we “ask Christians who remain hesitant on this point, and those tempted to yield to violence in any form, to keep in mind the words of the book of Isaiah: ‘They shall beat their swords into plowshares’ (2:4).”¹⁰ For in the light of the Gospel, we Christians must resist the corruption of our public spaces and the persistent violation of human dignity caused by gun violence and radically recommit ourselves to peace and justice. We must denounce, disrupt, and sever the logic of violence and domination that drives America’s obsession with gun ownership and violence. We recognize, however, that even as we reject gun violence, we have been largely silent—and therefore complicit—as our silence perpetuates systemic violence rooted in the logic of death. Yet we cannot remain silent, for in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “A time comes when silence is betrayal.”¹¹ We must speak and act. The College Theology Society joins in solidarity with other groups and communities in the struggle against gun violence and in the creation of a new world of peace founded on justice. We are committed to:

1. Engaging in the study of gun violence in ways proper to our disciplines, listening to and elevating the voices of those communities most affected by gun violence, as well as solutions proposed by organizers and advocates engaged with these communities;
2. Offering intersectional analysis of gun violence and religion, race, class, etc., including the disproportionate impact of gun violence on BIPOC communities;
3. Facilitating consultations, lectures, seminars, and public events on gun violence and the logic that perpetuates it in our institutions and local communities, using our institutional resources to further the conversation, and;

⁷ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40, at 14.

⁸ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (March 25, 1995), §12.

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html

⁹ Lila Hassan, <https://www.thetrace.org/2022/09/christian-nationalism-guns-election/> (Sept. 19, 2022).

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Oct. 3, 2020), §270.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” (April 4, 1967). King is quoting the opening lines of an anti-war statement by the pacifist group Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam. See <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/beyond-vietnam> on the context of this statement and https://www.crmvet.org/info/mlk_viet.pdf for the full text.

4. Dedicating a future convention, or significant portions of future conventions and calls for papers, to the question of gun violence and its underlying logic in line with the work of our longstanding Justice and Peace topic session.

We pray in hope that this statement and the efforts we will undertake as a Society will contribute to a future free from fear and violence, and in which the love and peace of God's reign may grow to abundance.

The Board of the College Theology Society