

Armed and defenseless: A gun-loving pacifist

by [Chad S. Mason](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

The subject came up before dinner as several sporting writers bragged, over glasses of Scotch, about their expensive gun vaults and the loaded pistols they keep bedside for “home defense.” When everyone had spoken but me, I said: “I keep all my guns in a locked safe to ensure that I cannot reach them quickly enough to hurt my enemies.”

Deep furrows appeared in their foreheads as they processed the words and came, one by one, to speechless recognition that I had, in fact, said what they thought I had said. Then someone changed the subject.

After dinner, in front of the fire, an employee of the National Rifle Association said he was intrigued to be hunting quail with a pacifist. I tried to explain how Christian defenselessness emerges not from optimism about human nature, or from illusions about the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance, but from faith—a firm persuasion that death is no longer the last word since Jesus has been raised from the dead. With Jesus himself as our norm, we seek the peace of the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

He listened with no visible reaction and then said, “I respect and admire your commitment; I can’t share it, but I respect and admire it.” We both loved quail hunting, but we could not agree on Jesus.

For several years I have earned part of my living by writing stories about hunting. The balance of my bread has come from my vocation as a part-time Mennonite pastor. The very mention of a gun-loving Mennonite—to say nothing of a whiskey-drinking one—often evokes double-takes. Many people are shocked to see a minister from one of the historic peace churches toting a shotgun and a pouch full of quail. Their assumption seems to be that hunting is an activity of questionable morality, perhaps even a species of violence, and in any case a behavior unbecoming a man of the cloth.

I find this assumption odd. Acceptance of hunting should follow without much controversy from the acceptance of carnivory more generally. (Whether carnivory is

consistent with Christian pacifism is a question beyond the scope of this essay; suffice it to say, for now, that Jesus and his disciples do not seem to have been vegetarians.) If raising chickens is not immoral—and lots of Mennonites raise chickens—then neither is hunting.

Acclaimed naturalist Christopher Camuto has observed, “The right to hunt is an extension of the right to eat.” We might extrapolate, then, by saying that the right to own guns is an extension of the right to hunt. As a Christian pacifist, I have no personal stake in any gun-rights argument that does not in some way relate to hunting and eating, and in any case I suspect that the very language of rights is a distraction. In truth there are no rights; there are only gifts, and to hunt is to receive a gift. So my plea to the antigun crusader is not, “Give me my rights!” but “Please do not deny me the gifts of God.”

Here, of course, I differ with those who would defend the “right to keep and bear arms” on the basis of constitutionality, self-defense or the ostensible need for a civilian militia. My freedom is not of a kind to be secured by arms, and I want my guns only for peaceable uses.

Nevertheless, misunderstandings about guns persist. The specter of a shooting preacher seems especially acute among urban Christians, many of whom can only see a weapon when they see a gun. I won’t deny that this perception is often born of tragic experience, but I keep trying to explain that another kind of rationality does exist. Many of us do not see a weapon when we look at a gun. Rather, we see a piece of recreational equipment not much different from a pair of skis or a motorcycle, except that a gun seems, to us, less dangerous.

A gun-loving pacifist must learn to live with criticism from all sides and will not likely feel at ease with the gun lobby or the antigun lobby. Gun-rights crusaders will criticize, saying strict adherence to the Sermon on the Mount leaves our civil rights wide open to confiscation by antagonistic powers. Thus they show that they have understood the sermon well enough, but have not accepted it. Emboldened by eschatological hope, the pacifist accepts vulnerability, and thus occupies a littoral position on the world’s ocean of fear.

Antigun and animal-rights crusaders also will criticize the gun-loving pacifist, due to their indiscriminate abhorrence of guns and hunting. To these I can only say that I have no argument for hunting except my practice of it. Indeed, to all enemies the pacifist offers not a defense but an invitation—in this case, “Come hunting with me.”