

The Church of Gun

Written by Jennifer Clement

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On a visit to the United States last autumn, I decided to go and visit the NRA (National Rifle Association) in Washington D.C., as I knew that the organization had built a museum, The National Firearms Museum, at their headquarters. The NRA is the most powerful lobby in the USA with 4.3 million members. On their website the NRA states that, while no absolute count is available, it is closely estimated that there are 60-65 million gun owners in the United States, 30-35 million of whom own handguns. According to survey research, at least 45% of American households own firearms. At the museum one word came to my mind: fetish, a word that literally means, "something irrationally revered". For a large part of the US population, guns are objects that are irrationally revered. The museum is a place of adoration that proclaims that a gun is equal to freedom. This museum is a "Church of Gun".

The museum contains more than 2,000 guns from the year 1350 to the present. There are guns that have been used in Hollywood movies and that belonged to people like John Wayne or Charlton Heston; there is a policeman's gun that was found half-melted left from the rubble of the Twin Towers that fell on 9/11; and guns that belonged to US presidents.

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The museum is divided into galleries. One of these portrays a “typical” boy’s room from the 1950’s. The bedroom is covered with gun motifs and contains a red flannel bed spread with pistol patterns on it, comic books showing rifles, and brown and black toy guns and rifles. There is a gallery devoted to hunting rifles, which honor the guns used by game hunters in Africa.

The support for guns is tied to the Second Amendment (Amendment II) of the United States Constitution, which is a part of the United States Bill of Rights that protects the right to keep and bear arms. It states, “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed”. In the practice of this holy reverence for the gun from the National Rifle Association, the museum, and also in the discourse of right wing politicians and the Christian Far Right, no one talks about the business and moneymaking behind the sale of guns. What, for example, is the yearly profit on guns sold in Mexico to the army, the police, and the cartels? Who are the shareholders?

On the web page for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, one of the most active anti-gun groups in the USA, there is an ongoing ticker that keeps track of people shot dead in the United States. For this year the number is 79,898. For today, September 24, 2010 as I write this piece, 89 people have been shot. However, as I wrote this last sentence it rose to 99! An average of 81 people die a day from gunshots and many, many more are wounded. Every few years, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence updates the statistics for gun deaths from around the world. For the year 2007 guns murdered 17 people in Finland, 35 in Australia, 39 in England and Wales, 60 in Spain, 194 in Germany, 200 in Canada, and 9,484 in the United States.

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