

Welcoming Remarks

Sarah Smith Memorial Conference 2008: "Are We Safe Yet?"

Miroslav Volf

Before we get to the panel discussion, I want to issue my own word of welcome to all of you who are gathered here. The Yale Center for Faith and Culture is very pleased to organize these kinds of conferences, where we can think about great and sometimes troubling issues of the day and try to shed some light from faith as well as from a wide variety of disciplines on the subject matter at hand.

I'll give now just a few words about how the question of security and vulnerability shaped itself in our own imagination and then translated into an invitation to have a conference of this sort. The conference's title is "Vulnerability and Security in an Anxious Age," and it's these two things together that we are trying to think about. Why security? That's seems so obvious. We live in an insecure world, and probably no other event as much as 9/11 has brought that fact to our public consciousness. Anything could happen at any time. Our lives could change and our livelihood could be endangered in profound ways.

But of course 9/11 did not create an insecure world; it became for us only an indicator, a symptom of the insecure world in which we live now. And it's also true that human beings have always lived with insecurity. Yet in the contemporary world, the modern world, we have peculiar forms of insecurities, of vulnerabilities that we need to attend to.

I think it's probably right to say—though maybe some of you sociologists might disagree with me—but it's probably right to say that we live in what Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens have called a "risks society." And by "risks society" they mean that unlike in previous eras, when the majority of our risks came from natural sources, we live today in a society of what they call "manufactured risks." These are risks produced by human activity, and above all they concern technological innovation. And because with technological innovation we are always entering new situations, they are unpredictable situations, so we do not quite know what kinds of risks we are going to incur by our own activities. For example, about two days ago there appeared this news summary: higher levels of chemicals often found in plastic food and drink packaging are associated with cardiovascular disease. So something that seemed innocuous as an innovation potentially carries significant risk. That example is just one symbol of the kind of situation in which we find ourselves. The greater the technological prowess involved, the more risk potential it carries for society.

Because we live in a risks society, a society in which risk is produced by human activity, we are also then increasingly averse to risk. If human activity creates risk, human activity can also prevent risk. Hence I think we insist on high margins of security. Children getting off and on school buses are protected; workers repairing our roads are protected often with flashing police cars; homes and businesses are protected with locks and laws; nations of course protect themselves--in fact, one of the main functions of government is precisely to "securitize" a nation.

Consonant with the idea of enlarging the margins of security, in many cases the goal is the reduction of risk, even to the level of inviolability, so that it is not only that the loss of any life is one loss too many; more radically, the loss of anything of value is loss that we cannot quite accept. From one perspective it seems like the most natural of all goals. Why should one not seek inviolability? Why should one not seek total security? But can we achieve it? And more importantly for us today, I think, is the question, at what cost can we achieve the levels of security, even lower levels than that of inviolability? We often think of economic costs in this regard. But I have in mind primarily human costs. What does it cost to achieve high levels of security with regard to have we understand ourselves and live our lives?

As we observed these dimensions of the security situation in which we find ourselves today across the broad spectrum of our life, we also, being at a theological school, tried to take a look at religious faith and theological traditions to see what they might have to say about security. And to our surprise, we found very little reflection on such a fundamental issue as is security. It's not that we didn't find primary religious statements on security in the tradition and in the Scriptures in which our traditions are based. In the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible (or as we Christians call it, the Old Testament), for instance, the psalmist often prays to God, who is "my refuge." What is the talk of God as "refuge" other than relating security to God? Or take a look at the very end of the Christian Bible—it ends with the image of the New Jerusalem. And if you read carefully about this New Jerusalem, you find it is a city that is utterly and completely secured—the city that can never be conquered, the city that can never be undone.

Security is a very important theme in biblical traditions, but theologians have slept through their reading of those portions of the Bible. They haven't taken up that issue of security, they have not reflected much on how what biblical traditions say about security relates to our contemporary search for security. So we thought it important for us first to reflect on our own about this theme

and then to consider what kind of contribution religious reflection might make to the wider debate about security. That's why security.

But why then vulnerability? Well, vulnerability is obviously the reason why we pursue security. If we were not vulnerable, the question of security would never arise. I'm a theologian, and presumably I can say with some degree of confidence that God needs no security force to protect God's throne. God is by definition inviolable. Human beings are not by definition inviolable. We need to have our existence and our well being secured. That is why those lights flash on the buses when kids get on and off of them; that's why we lock our homes at night and sometimes also during the day; that's why we have a police force, and so on.

But vulnerability also touches on security in another way: human vulnerability places a limit on the pursuit of security. It determines in part, or at least shapes in part, the nature of what it means to be secure. For vulnerability is fundamental to who we are as human beings. To be inviolable is to be divine; to be human is to be, and I think is always to remain, vulnerable. You can almost put it this way, that vulnerability is the essential condition of human life. No vulnerability, no human life.

Now that has very important implications for what it means to pursue security and, I think, places certain limits on security. We tend to think that the more secure we are, the better off we will be. But can vulnerable persons ever be fully secure? Can we ever create conditions of inviolability? Isn't it the case that for vulnerable creatures to be inviolable is a contradiction in terms? And if we could create conditions in which we would be fully secure, would it be desirable to do so? Would it be good to create a world of total security? What kind of world would it be? What implications would it have for freedom and for unpredictability, which is related fundamentally to our freedom? What implications would inviolable security have for the interdependence of human beings, which qualifies us as human beings? Wouldn't inviolability be the equivalent of being an individual fortress, a completely independent individual or a nation? And given human nature, would we not as such precisely be a danger for others? So these are some of the reasons we chose to deal with vulnerability and the limits of security.

But I think vulnerability is related also to the forms of security. If I see things rightly, to a large degree we seek security by the deployment of force aided by technology. And there are obvious problems related to that approach. One of the problems is that when we employ it, we reinforce the competitive relationship that exists between the object that needs to be secured and the threat, or the person who threatens that object. That's an inherently unstable

situation. The means of security call forth ways of undermining that security, and new ways of undermining security demand new means in order to achieve security. So there is this potential of an escalating threat and therefore the potential of increased vulnerability. Therein is problem two. In a technologically driven situation in a risk society, ever new means of “securitization” potentially and often actually create their own risks. So we are made vulnerable not just by external threats but also by the very means we keep them at bay.

One of the reasons we have decided to pursue the nuclear question in the context of our discussions of vulnerability and security is that this issue is in a sense a paradigmatic case of not only escalating threat but also of the insecurity created by the means of “securitization.” Nuclear weapons are a prime example of a presumed means of security morphing into a clear threat to security. There’s risk in possessing them, risk to the possessor of them, the society; and there is risk of their falling into the wrong hands. As Mikhail Gorbachev said in 2007, “It is becoming clearer that nuclear weapons are no longer a means of achieving security. In fact, with every passing year, they make our security more precarious.” That character of increased risk created by the means of security must be an essential component of dealing with risk in the technologically driven situation of a risks society.

I hope that these brief comments I have made shed some light on why the big questions we pursued for this conference became, What human loss is entailed in pursuing security to the point of inviolability? What modes and means of security beyond the use of force aided by technology are appropriate to beings for whom vulnerability belongs to their very character? What contribution can religious tradition, in particular in our case the Christian faith, make to rethinking the security issue given our inherent vulnerability and the inherent risks in the society in which we live? Those are the broad questions that guided us as we thought about the question of vulnerability and security. As I already indicated, the question of nuclear non-proliferation is almost like a test case of the situation in which we find ourselves today.

I want to thank all of you, and especially the speakers and the members of tonight’s panel, who are joining us in grappling with these issues. As you see, I have mainly questions—I have no answers whatsoever! So we are here to think through some of those issues, and we are here to think through them centered on the question of nuclear non-proliferation.