

Cdr. Sen. Gr. Raag Rolfsen:
The Significance of Vulnerability in a Time of Crisis¹

The greatest misnomer of all ... is the word “security.”
(Catherine Pickstock, in *On Writing*)²

An age whose objective conditions of existence
have been radically transformed by the possibility of nuclear death
evades the need for a radical transformation of its thought and action
by thinking and acting as though nothing of radical importance
had happened
(Hans J. Morgenthau, in “Death in a nuclear age”)³

And you all know, Security Is Mortals cheefest Enemie.
(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)⁴

Section 1: Introduction – Overview of the Present Paper

The aim of this paper is to make plausible that the security situation that the world finds itself in today is, at least partly, due to a reductive and in some measure flawed concept of security. The ruling security-concept, I will claim, is flawed and reductive owing to an identification of security and invulnerability. This identification, as I see it, only takes into consideration one side of the significance of human vulnerability: the requirement of protection. At a more fundamental level, human vulnerability constitutes the decisive point in existence where the possibility of being hurt and the possibility of life in goodness and community intersect. This double and inseparable possibility demarcates the original site of the humanity of the human. The “pre-original” site of the human, borrowing a concept from philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, is thus not an objective fact, but an ethical decision.

The challenges facing humankind in the age of globalization signal a need to revisit this ethical and pre-original site of human existence. The ruling and reductive concept of security, identifying security and invulnerability, has been possible to maintain, although at the cost of

¹ Paper presented at the breakout session during the Sara Smith Memorial Conference at Yale University, New Haven, September 19, 2008. All rights belong to the author.

² Catherine Pickstock, *On Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. Oxford (UK) and Malden Massachussets, 1998. Page 105.

³ In, J. Riemer, ed., *Jewish reflections on Death*. New York: Schocken Books, 1974. Page 46.

⁴ *Macbeth*, Third Act, Fifth Scene.

horrific wars, in the international political order associated with concepts such as “Political Realism” or *Raison d’État*. While the principles of enmity and national interests have maintained a relative balance of power among nations, domestic freedom and the rule of law have left some spaces open in the private and public spheres where ethical life has been possible.

This political order of territorially independent states, following from the political philosophies of Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, and from the principles of the peace of Westphalia in 1648, concluding the bloody thirty years war, presupposes the possibility to contain the political, social, and economic consequences of the actions of a state within the borders of that state. In the age of globalisation, such containment is no longer possible. The heyday of political realism is now over. The choices, events, lifestyles, and decisions inside the borders of one state uncontrollably crosses borders of nations, states, and continents. Humanity is in our time therefore forced to explore the ethical and political significance of this newfound and shared vulnerability.

The theme of this present conference, seeing the question of vulnerability and security in light of the nuclear threat, is especially revealing with regard to this situation of a globally shared vulnerability. Most probably, the mindset of the scientists procuring the technology to produce the atom bomb were firmly inside political realism, trying to contribute towards saving the international order of independent states against Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. The moment the bomb and the technology were actual facts, however, that mindset was blown to pieces. From that moment on, we have implicitly lived inside the global political order of shared vulnerability, an order that becomes more and more explicit in today’s reality. Today, political leaders, NGOs, and other actors on the world stage are seeking multilateral and global solutions to shared threats and challenges. These challenges includes international crime; often committed under the presumed protection of state sovereignty, global warming, trade, finance, immigration, nuclear disarmament, governance, tax havens, and so on.

The USA has been a latecomer to the insight following from a shared and global sense of vulnerability. Through its strength, not at least due to its leading role in nuclear arms technology, and separated by vast oceans from other power-centres of the world, it has been able to control its own hemisphere such that its national sovereignty and security have been

possible to maintain.⁵ Because of this, political realism, an even in an isolationist version, still seems a viable alternative for US foreign policy. From a global perspective, or at least from a European perspective, the fear is that the continued belief in an isolationist/ realist political philosophy by the leaders of the world's most globalist economy will lead to a paradox where the in principle US isolationism means expansionism in political practise.

The invitations directed to the USA; to strengthen the role of the UN, join the International Criminal Court, sign the ban on land mines, take part in the fight against small arms, work towards just regulations for trade and finance, commit itself in the fight against global warming, these invitations do not stem from hostility towards the US. They are, to be honest, only a plea to the most powerful nation of the world to again join in a fight to save our common world.

I will in the following take as a point of departure the expectations that existed all around the world that the US would take the newfound experience of shared vulnerability following the terrorist attacks in September 2001 to build a new and comprehensive approach in its foreign policy. The terrorist attacks coincided with the publication of a report by Church of Norway called *Vulnerability and Security* that outlined an approach to security building on the challenges and possibilities inherent in human vulnerability.

I will then in a subsequent section claim that the security-insecurity spiral that we are riding today can be explained by three facets of the ongoing globalization: first, the spread of techno-scientific civilization and market economy, second, a changed attitude to the earth, seeing it as a standing reserve, i.e. as a chamber of raw material, and third, the increasing inequality both among states and inside states, leading to an increased feeling of injustice.

The following three sections will try to substantiate from the perspectives of international relations (Michael Dillon), philosophy (Giorgio Agamben), and sociology (Ulrich Beck), that the ruling concept of security today has reached a terminal stage, resulting in an exhaustion of political imagination. I will claim with Michael Dillon that Western metaphysics, and the culture built upon this metaphysics, is obsessed with security, because "the thought within

⁵ Although it must be noted that this control, at times, has been achieved with unjustifiable means, the memory of which today turns against the USA.

which political thought occurs – metaphysics – is a security project.”⁶ The failure of this project in our age, according to Giorgio Agamben, forces political decision-makers to reach for extraordinary security measures to a degree where the state of exception threatens to become the rule and the state of emergency becomes normal. People are then no longer citizens participating in the political life of a state, but biological life to be protected.⁷ This point is strengthened by Ulrich Beck’s now famous sociological study from 1986,⁸ arguing that we in our times live in a transitional epoch where the essence of the political to an increasing degree becomes not the production and distribution of wealth, but the production and distribution of risks.

Through all this, I want to show that the metaphysical engine of the tradition leading to modernity, whose end we continue to live inside, is fuelled by a reductive understanding of security. I will claim that the nuclear threat can be interpreted as the end result of this reductive development, combining ultimate security with an ultimate misuse of vulnerability. Beneath the nuclear umbrella, life is determined in its nudity, reducing vulnerability to the possibility to die.

I will end my presentation by trying to argue that a more nuanced approach to the relation between vulnerability and security than the one dominating our metaphysical tradition, an approach taking the strength of vulnerability and not the dream of invulnerability as its point of departure, constitutes a better alternative compared to the too narrow and one-dimensional approach now guiding the answers to questions of security, and of the future destiny of our world. This approach, which I find in both a shared personal experience and at the heart of my faith, points to a renewed role for faith communities. Faith communities make up pockets in society where questions of meaning are not exclusively answered through the application of calculation and technology.

Section 2: Background – 9/11 and a Norwegian Report

⁶ Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security. Towards a Political Philosophy of Continental Thought*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. Page 13.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998.

⁸ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. London, et al.: SAGE Publications, 1992.

In 1999, following the war against Serbia, a group from the Commission on International Affairs in Church of Norway prepared a report called *Vulnerability and Security*. It was not before the events September 11, 2001, however, that the approach found in the report was noticed, eventually in many churches and milieus around the world. The terrorist attacks challenged the political imagination of the world with the question of how to understand security. The Norwegian report made the alternatives clear: either we identify security and invulnerability – using all intelligence and force available to render our enemy harmless, or, we take the new and shared sense of vulnerability as the point of departure from where to build a broader and more comprehensive approach to security. In this latter approach, vulnerability would have to be seen as a fundamental presupposition of security, and not as its contrast.

In the period following 9/11, this challenge to rethink the security concept in light of a new and shared sense of vulnerability was directed to the US population and leadership also from elsewhere. In the fall of 2001, the General Secretary of The World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser invited leaders from the global church to discuss the situation. Following several days of talks, Raiser pointed to “the genuine manifestation of solidarity and sympathy with the people of the United States”. He also asked a question:

Will the people of the United States now be prepared in turn to share in the condition of vulnerability and victimhood which has been the dominant experience of people in other parts of the world?⁹

This double perspective on the situation was held by the large majority of opinion leaders around the world. In the September/ October, 2008 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Robert Kagan points to a Pew poll showing that around 70 percent both felt sympathy for the US, and at the same time believed “it was good that Americans know what it is like to be vulnerable.” Kagan reads this as showing that the solidarity and the sympathy were not deep-seated. That, in his words: “the resentment remained.”¹⁰ I do not think that this is true. People around the world, positioned both strategically and geographically otherwise than the USA have throughout the centuries learned a hard lesson, to a great extent from their own mistakes. Small and medium-

⁹ The talks were held in Geneva, November 29 - December 2, 2001. The Concluding Remarks of the General Secretary can be found at <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/symbolic.html>. Last accessed, September 15, 2008.

¹⁰ *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 7, Number 5. September/ October, 2008, page 31.

sized countries have long had to learn to depend on other capacities than military might and political and economic power. One of these capacities has been the awareness of shared vulnerabilities with regard to air and water pollution, natural resources, and the consequences of catastrophes and wars. Like vulnerability, peace is not something you own. It is something you share.

In a more and more globalized world of systemic interconnectedness, where the effects of our actions no longer can be contained inside national borders, Reinhold Niebuhr's thesis of different moralities for high politics on one side and the private sphere on the other is no longer tenable.¹¹ Pure national self-interest is not sufficient in a globalized world. We need trust, cooperation, respect, dialogue, and understanding also in the strategic approach of high politics. That opinion leaders world-wide thought that an increased sense of shared vulnerability would influence US political leadership in that direction was not a sign that their sympathy was superficial.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, this shared sense of vulnerability was also present inside the United States. One year anniversary, in September 2002, Pete Hamill, the New York journalist, remembered the days following the attacks:

We stood on street corners together, manual laborers and dot-com workers, mothers and children, all staring downtown at the smoldering stumps of the towers. We asked about children, and dogs, and survivors. The emotions of awe, horror, rage were gone quickly, replaced by a shared sense of vulnerability.

That is what remains: vulnerability. [...] We all learned, that terrible morning, that we could die while reaching for a piece of toast at breakfast. Where I live, that knowledge has made us more human.¹²

In line with this, the Norwegian report proposed that the understanding of security taking a shared sense of vulnerability as its point of departure was the more fundamentally human

¹¹ See, e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960 (1932).

¹² National Geographic, September 2002. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0209/feature5/index.html>. Last accessed, September 15, 2008.

alternative.¹³ Even Hobbes, by many seen as the founder of modern political philosophy, takes the protection of human vulnerability from the dangers of the war of all against all as his point of departure in his definition of the political. The protection of human vulnerability founds the political. At an even more fundamental level, vulnerability marks the spot where the possibilities of being hurt, on the one side, and of being taken care of and loved, on the other, constitute an inseparable and inescapable unity at the heart of the human. Promoting a security concept on the dream of invulnerability would thus turn the back to an essential feature of human existence; it would be inhuman. From this conception of the relation between vulnerability and security follows a security-concept that would mean a broader and more comprehensive approach, involving states, organizations, companies, communities, and individuals, towards establishing and maintaining a framework safeguarding the “up-side” of vulnerability, and preventing its misuse.

Now we know, after President Bush’s repeated “We learned a harsh lesson, and that is that oceans can no longer protect us from those who hate America,”¹⁴ that the security concept identifying security and invulnerability was the one prevailing. The ‘security as separation,’ guiding US foreign policy since the Monroe doctrine, and which natural barriers had guaranteed in earlier times, should now, in the age of genuine globalization, be achieved through the use of superior force.

It would be futile to try to go back in time in order to show that a less unilateral approach would have resulted in a better and more peaceful world than the one we live in today. This presentation will not be guided by hindsight, but by the present situation, and by the different futures inherent in the choices that stand before us in this present. The present situation is before anything else characterized through an ongoing and deepening globalization.

Section 3: Three developments belonging to globalization

How should we assess the current security situation? One way to go about this assessment would be to describe and measure ongoing conflicts, and then to add all this up in order to

¹³ For the following, see, Karin Dokken, Raag Rolfsen, Sturla Stålsett, and Hans Morten Haugen, *Vulnerability and Security*. Oslo: Commission on International Affairs in Church of Norway, 2001, especially, sections 1.1-4, 2.5, 3.2, and, 3.5.

¹⁴ See, e.g., US Department of Defense, “Bush: Terrorist’s Arrest: ‘A Serious Blow to al-Qaeda’,” www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=29347 . Last accessed, August 29, 2008.

draw a picture of the present situation. Such an approach would include the ongoing fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Poland Missile Shield, the Georgia-crisis, the increasingly aggressive rhetoric between Russia and the West,¹⁵ the conflicts in Africa, and the ongoing effort of some states to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Most likely, we would also have to include the ongoing financial crisis as constituting a sign of a slow change in global power-relations. We would also have to take the ongoing climatic change into account, and the rising prices on energy. All this would probably add up to a picture that would signal the inception of a post-American global order, including the growth of great powers, such as China and Russia, combining a liberal economy with autocratic domestic politics.

An analysis along these lines would in my eyes have to be completed by a more wide-ranging, structural and overarching approach that would ask the question of how these developments and conflicts are inter-connected. In my view, we would then find that *globalization* would be a major force sustaining the conflicts that taken together make up the presents security situation. I would propose that globalization, through simplification, to be sure, can be interpreted as the result of three highly inter-dependent and mutually re-enforcing developments:

1. The spread and deepening of techno-scientific culture
2. The reduction of the earth to raw material: Heidegger's "standing reserve"
3. The unequal distribution of wealth, goods and risk, and the feeling of injustice

1. The spread and deepening of techno-scientific culture

The globalization of techno-scientific civilization means both that the technological approach to reality is spreading to all corners of the world, but just as significantly, it also means that all areas of existence, step by step are drawn into the sphere lit up by the transforming capacity of the techno-scientific gaze. The division of the sciences, which first happened systematically in Germany following the collapse of Hegelian idealism, did not only lead to a more relevant division of scientific work.¹⁶ Beyond that, it meant the separation of science from theology and philosophy, and gradually it also meant that the human sciences chose to

¹⁵ On the White House press brief August 28, Dana Perino informed the press that there were discussions in the US administration "on scrapping the U.S.-Russia civil nuclear agreement." See, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080828-5.html> .

¹⁶ For this, see, Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933* (6. Auflage). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999.

apply methods of research inspired from the so-called exact natural sciences. Reality then became the object of human reasoning, and reality was gradually reduced to calculability. Everything that could not be counted, measured, and calculated was slowly excluded from the domain of truth. We see the result of this development in our own times, where the truth of all areas of existence; the quality of schools, the force of hurricanes, employment, the economy, and even human happiness, is reduced to what can be measured.

In all this, science and technology make an alliance with market economy. The freedom of market liberalism does not primarily mean the freedom of people, but the *freeing* of goods, natural resources; land, water, wind, minerals, and so on from their traditional natural and cultural belonging, making them available for techno-scientific economy. Democracy and market economy do in no way belong together or follow from each other. The combination of rapidly growing liberal economies and autocratic domestic politics in China and other Asian countries and partly in Russia as well, is proof good enough for this. One could even claim that economic growth today benefits more from autocracy than from democracy. When political power joins forces with the market, the access to the necessary resources is facilitated without having to be concerned over popular resistance. When the rule of law is set aside, it is only drill, drill, drill.

2. The reduction of the earth to raw material: Heidegger's "standing reserve"

A basic requirement for this alliance between sciences, technology, and market economy, is constituted through a change in the perception of reality, a change that was quite prophetically described by Martin Heidegger more than fifty years ago in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology."¹⁷ In this essay, Heidegger records a change inside techno-scientific modernity itself. Traditional science up to a certain point operated with a pure subject-object relation. Nature was seen as governed by timeless laws, and the task of science was to reflect these laws. In this way, science gave human existence the opportunity to conform to and adjust to life in an environment governed by unchangeable laws. There was, one could say, a relative balance between activity and passivity in human existence.

¹⁷ In, Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, revised and expanded edition, edited by David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge, 1993. Pages 311-341.

Slowly this balance was lost, and the weight ended up on the side of human activity. One no longer waits for the earth to bring forth her fruits; the fruits are demanded from her. Nature is ordered or challenged to provide resources that can be on call whenever needed. In Heidegger's words: "Modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such."¹⁸ The difference between the traditional approach and the approach of the technology of late modernity can be envisioned as the difference between traditional farming and agro-business. Heidegger says: [T]he cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another setting-in-order, which *sets upon* nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry." Heidegger then continues: "air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example; uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be unleashed for destructive or peaceful purposes."¹⁹ Heidegger calls this that is "set upon," ordered and challenged, *Bestand*, which is translated into English as "standing reserve."²⁰ Humans, in our age no longer live in nature or on earth; we somehow float above her surface extracting energy and resources from her.

Although one should always suspect nostalgic and reactionary tendencies in Heidegger's thinking, we should nevertheless pay attention to this early warning of a development which we see reaching a climax in our own time, where the earth is challenged beyond a limit where resources are no longer renewable.

3. The unequal distribution of wealth, goods and risk, and the feeling of injustice

The third and final of the three mutually reinforcing developments belonging to globalisation is the growing inequality in the distribution of goods, wealth, and risks. Despite all efforts both internationally and domestically to stop the gap between the poorest and the richest from growing, inequalities continue to increase, between states as well as inside states. This is not coincidental. It follows from the development already described. When the earth is transformed into raw material or standing reserve, and is thus disconnected from its traditional natural and cultural belonging, and through market economy is freed and made available for

¹⁸ Ibid., page 320.

¹⁹ Ibid., page 320.

²⁰ Ibid., page 322: "Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve (*Bestand*)."

the techno-scientific approach, the ones controlling the technology will always be the ones benefiting. These actors will also secure their position through using the technological superiority to maintain military supremacy. Among the ones not benefiting, a feeling of injustice will grow.

The potential of conflict in these mutually reinforcing developments becomes acute when the extracting of raw material reaches a level beyond the sustainable. This is what is happening today. On all continents we see conflicts over natural resources; over minerals, oil, wood, and land. Very often we see governments and multi-national companies cooperating in order to make the land of indigenous people available for extraction of resources. At the same time we see entire populations endangered by flooding or drought because of global warming, as in Bangladesh and parts of Africa. Today, we see the truth of what Ulrich Beck said more than twenty years ago: “Wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom.”²¹

From this, there comes into existence a community of fear and anger, claiming that if they are to carry the main burden of risks, they should also get a reasonable part both of wealth and power. This, finally, also includes the ultimate power; nuclear technology. In Heidegger’s words cited above, they want the possibility to “set upon uranium to yield atomic energy, which can be unleashed for destructive or peaceful purposes.” The Iranian and North-Korean nuclear programs are probably only the first signs of a post-American era, where other actors than the nuclear powers of today will try to balance the, in their eyes unjust distribution of power, wealth, and risks. The combination of these three developments of globalization, the spread of techno-scientific culture, the reduction of the earth to a standing reserve, and the feeling of injustice will steadily increase the probability of nuclear proliferation beyond the control of the legal framework (e.g. the NPT) and the bodies set to control it.

Section 4: Agamben’s *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*

In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger goes one step beyond describing the late modern access to nature, reducing it to a standing reserve. From this, he goes on to identify “the supreme danger,” which occurs at that point in history when humans themselves are conceived as raw material, i.e. as *Bestand*; as standing reserve:

²¹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London, Newbury Park, New Dehli: SAGE Publications, 1992. Page 35.

[T]he supreme danger ... attests itself to us [when] what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve.²²

Our current use of concepts such as “work force,” “human resources,” “human capital,” and the like, should make us alert to the fact that in our times this is becoming a real danger. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has taken up this thread in Heidegger’s thinking. In his view, humans are slowly going from being perceived as citizens having rights to becoming what he labels “bare life.” People are to a diminishing degree seen as actors on the political stage. They are more and more seen as life to be protected, and taken, if necessary. The political space constituted by the rule of law, and other mechanism preventing the direct rule of the sovereign, such as the separation of powers in the US constitution, this space is slowly shrinking. A shared perception of insecurity and vulnerability creates a political climate where rights and the rule of law are seen as a luxury that we no longer can afford.

Kant’s dream of perpetual peace is replaced by a reality of perpetual war, fought both abroad and in the homeland. When the threat to national security becomes constant, the stage of emergency becomes normal, and the state of exception becomes the rule. When the sense of crisis grows, and fears and the feelings of insecurity become general, the sovereign is no longer elected to guarantee the rule of law, but as commander in chief.

According to Agamben, the hidden paradigm of the modern is not the city, but the camp. The stripping of rights seen in Guantanamo, in camps and centres for refugees and asylum-seekers all over the world, and following from the security measures implemented in the war against terror, would thus indicate a transfiguration of the space of modernity into a camp-like existence. Agamben concludes his work on *Sovereign Power and Bare Life* in the following way:

[T]he birth of the camp in our time appears as the event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself. It is produced at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state [...] enters into a lasting crisis, and the State decides

²² Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” , page 332.

to assume directly the care of the nation's biological life as its proper task. [...] The camp is the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order – or, rather, the sign of the system's inability to function without being transformed into a lethal machine.²³

In my view, we should not reject this as just another theory of conspiracy. We should rather see it as a warning, challenging our political imagination, forcing us to find more in the growing and shared sense of vulnerability than just a pretext for even stronger security measures in the name of a flawed concept of security.

Section 5: The Western Metaphysical Security Project (Michael Dillon)

The existence of nuclear weapons, and current camp-like life fenced in beneath the nuclear umbrella, signals the paradoxical conclusion to the Western metaphysical project understood as at heart a security project. We, the humans of late modernity yearned for absolute security in the sense of having an ultimate weapon to render our enemy harmless, and have ended up fearing our own destruction. Ultimate security has turned into ultimate insecurity. According to Michael Dillon, the one, to my knowledge, who has most convincingly argued that the current globalization finds its driving force in Western metaphysics seen as at heart a security project, existence in our liminal age is caught in:

a terminal paradox which not only subverts its own predicate of security, most spectacularly by rendering the future of terrestrial existence conditional on the strategies and calculations of its hybrid regime of sovereignty and governmentality, but which also seems to furnish a predicate of global life, a new experience in the context of which the political has to be recovered and to which it must address itself: the globalization of politics of security in the global extension of nihilism and technology, and the advent of the real prospect of human species extinction.²⁴

It might be a strange thought for many to think of Western metaphysics as at heart a security-project. Michael Dillon's starting point is simple. The growing complexity of life in the Greek city-state, the *polis* constitutes the place of origin of Western metaphysics. The cradle of

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998. Page 175.

²⁴.Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security*, page 15.

philosophy is thus itself political. The project of philosophy is basically to make existence understandable, predictable, in one word; secure, so as to be able to live a good life in the *polis*.

Out of the nocturnal chaos of existence, seemingly suspended in nothingness, thought feels compelled to carve out representations and concepts that facilitate the access to the increasingly complex reality of the city-state. This is why, according to Dillon, the Leibnizian formulation: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” captures the essence of the conjuncture of politics and philosophy. This, in Dillon’s words, “imbues [metaphysics and traditional political thought] with an endless security imperative.”²⁵ The amazement before mythical existence is slowly replaced by a need to secure a ground for life in the polis. This, Dillon says, “requires that it be shown that something is wrested from nothing and is prevented somehow against falling back into nothingness. . . . it requires us to discover how secure things are – what secures them and how they can be secured.” This conjunction of politics and metaphysics, at least in Dillon’s understanding, constitutes the driving force of what we call “Western civilization,” all the way up to our own time. He says: “While philosophy and the *polis* were deeply implicated in one another from the outset of Western thought . . . modern philosophy and politics continue to be deeply implicated in one another. But now differently.”²⁶

The difference is that we have now entered the end-stage of the history determined by this security project. The twentieth century signals, with its world wars and nuclear industry, the exhaustion of the possibilities of this project. Dillon characterizes this exhaustion through “its . . . deeply problematic inauguration as both a State of emergency and a certain kind of democratic project.” When the state of emergency becomes the normal state, rights and freedom are reduced to the rights and freedom to be protected. Democracy is then based on fear and not in the right to participate in political decisions. In this age, nuclear arms and industry give a particular strong signal: “The advent of the globalised industrial nuclear age exhibits not only the hollowness of that system’s foundational promises to secure order, identity and freedom . . . but also, in the gulf that exists between what its (inter)national

²⁵ Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security*. Page 19.

²⁶ Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security*. Page 23.

political prospectus offers and what its (inter)national politics provides: the exhaustion of its political imagination.”²⁷

The ongoing globalization, and its deepening into spheres that were previously exempted, underlines the interpretation of our age as the end-state of a security project. The globalization of techno-scientific culture leads, as was pointed out, in our days to an exhaustion of natural resources, which we see in the increasing scarcity of water, oil, minerals, and food. We are thus, to an increasing degree forced to re-circulate our resources. The re-circulation of paper, glass, plastic and metal, however, is only an outward sign of a more profound re-circulation, namely the recirculation of risks and dangers. Inside politics, as well as inside the industrial and economical fields, growth today is primarily found inside areas pertaining to security, and the dangers we are secured against are themselves man made results of modernization. Late modernity feeds on its own waste, always perceiving the risks and dangers following from its activity as new opportunities for growth. And, the need for security seems to be the foundational logic of this spiral:

Dillon says that in our times, it is impossible to:

escape noticing the way security impresses itself upon us as a kind of floating and inter-textual signifier which, by constant reference to all other signs of the times, transgresses disciplinary, political, corporeal and geographical boundaries as it courses throughout the defining technologically inspired discourses of Modernity: state security; national security; political security; global security; financial security; individual security; collective security; personal security; physical security; psychological security; sexual security; social security; environmental security; food security...²⁸

We all know that he could have gone on and on, especially in our times of terror and computers.

²⁷ Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security*. Page 27.

²⁸ Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security*. Page 16.

Section 6: Risk society (Ulrich Beck)

Dillon's theory of Western history as a security project; reaching its end stage in our age, is supported by Ulrich Beck's sociological work on *Risk Society* from 1986. Beck's work is today experiencing a renewed actuality, not at least due to the fears of global warming accelerating beyond human control, and fears of uncontrollable proliferation of nuclear technology and weapons. While humans in earlier times confronted dangers originating from natural causes; diseases, catastrophes, and the unpredictable dispositions of nature, often interpreted mythically, humans in late modernity mainly face dangers and risks stemming from human activity. Today, in Beck's words, we are "concerned ... with problems resulting from techno-economic development itself. Modernization is becoming *reflexive*; it is becoming its own theme."²⁹ According to Beck, "in the modernization process, more and more *destructive* forces are being unleashed, forces before which the human imagination stands in awe."³⁰ The society in which we live finds itself in a transitional phase from "the production of wealth" toward "the production of risks."³¹ This leads to a slow but decisive change of political logic and practise: a "change from the logic of wealth distribution in a society of scarcity to the logic of risk distribution in late modernity."³² The basic nature of this change is, according to Beck, that while we in earlier times mainly related to external nature, now, science, technology, nature, and politics; modernity itself, have become increasingly self-referential.

An important contribution to the understanding of today's security situation is Beck's insistence on the essential *virtual character of risks*. Poverty, illness, poor standards of living, and the other effects of early industrialization were discernible, tangible, and verifiable. They were real. Risks are per definition virtual.³³ Risk and the perception of risk are the same.³⁴ This has vast consequences for life in late and reflexive modernity. An enormous field of opportunities opens. Beck says: "What food is for hunger, eliminating risks, *or interpreting*

²⁹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1992. Page 19

³⁰ *Ibid.*, page 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, page 19.

³² *Ibid.*, page 19

³³ See, *ibid.*, page 34.

³⁴ See, *ibid.*, page 55.

them away, is for the consciousness of risk.”³⁵ The industry of eliminating, insuring against, assessing, and managing risks is growing and thriving in the space opened by risk society. Beck comments: “The industrial system *profits* from the abuses it produces, and very nicely, thank you.”³⁶ He then adds: “[I]n risk production, developed capitalism has absorbed, generalized and normalized the destructive forces of war. [...] The economy becomes *self-referential*, independent of its context of satisfying human needs.”³⁷

And, we should note, even when the catastrophe, predicted by many, manifests itself, the relation between risk and reality cannot be ascertained. Is the increased strength of hurricanes caused by global warming which again is caused by the emission of carbon dioxide? Is the collapse of financial markets caused by lack of regulations and control, or does the collapse happen because of over-regulation? In risk society, the space open for speculation will always be open. Beck thus calls our age “the speculative age.” We are living in a “shadow kingdom of invisible forces.”³⁸ There is, in his words, an “imperceptible and yet omnipresent latent causality,”³⁹ threatening all areas of life. This is strengthened by what he calls “the systemic interdependence [of risks, which] corresponds to the absence of isolable single causes.”⁴⁰ This leads to a fragmentation of responsibility. He then adds: “The current crisis ... is an invisible immiseration in the face of flourishing wealth, ultimately with global extent, but without a political subject.”⁴¹

The virtuality of risks becomes especially pertinent in relation to what we can call absolute risks, such as a nuclear holocaust, or global warming reaching a level beyond human control. Beck says “People are pursued into their very dreams by the anxieties of a ‘nuclear

³⁵ Ibid., page 75.

³⁶ Ibid., page 56.

³⁷ Ibid., page 56.

³⁸ Ibid., page 72.

³⁹ Ibid., page 72.

⁴⁰ Ibid., page 32.

⁴¹ Ibid., page 55.

holocaust’.”⁴² But, these risks too, stay virtual until the point of catastrophe.⁴³ ⁴⁴ They stay open for discussion, and are assessed differently at different times. In Beck’s words:

The threat from nuclear weapons with unimaginable destructive force does not change. The perception of it fluctuates wildly. For decades the phrase was: “Live with the bomb.” Then once again it drove millions into the streets. Agitation and calming down can have the same cause: the unimaginability of a danger with which one must nonetheless live.”⁴⁵

The semi-reality of unimaginable risk also opens a space of political opportunities. In risk society, security too becomes virtual. Security becomes the object of promise and propaganda. In Beck’s formulation: “The promise of security grows with the risks and destruction and must be reaffirmed over and over again to an alert and critical public through cosmetic or real interventions in the techno-economic development.”⁴⁶ From the politician’s point of view, there is a “political potential in catastrophes.”⁴⁷ The incalculability of risks, e.g. with regard to the nuclear threat, to the financial market, and to the catastrophes following from global warming, is treated as it was calculable.⁴⁸ The growth of risks, extending its consequences far into the private sphere at the same time extends political power.

The increasing self-reference and reflexivity of modernization is resulting in a tornado-effect. More and more areas of life that previously were defined as “non-political” are sucked into the risk and security-spiral: “*The elimination of the causes of the hazards in the modernization*

⁴² Ibid., page 72.

⁴³ In an article in *Der Spiegel Online* (June 8, 2008): <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,570487,00.html>, (last accessed September 9, 2008) says: Some scientists have also wondered aloud just how much risk we should be willing to accept when it comes to scientific experiments such as those being conducted at CERN (The European Centre for Nuclear Research). Even if the chance of things going wrong is infinitesimally small, they say, the potential disaster is unimaginably large. The question, “how improbable does a catastrophe have to be to justify proceeding with an experiment?” seems never to have been seriously examined,” wrote University of Cambridge physicist Adrian Kent in a 2003 paper.

⁴⁴ New York Times, April 15, 2008: In Walker Percy’s “Love in the Ruins,” the protagonist, a doctor and an inventor, recites what he calls the scientist’s prayer. It goes like this: “Lord, grant that my work increase knowledge and help other men. Failing that, Lord, grant that it will not lead to man’s destruction. Failing that, Lord, grant that my article in *Brain* be published before the destruction takes place.”

⁴⁵ Beck, *Risk Society*, page 75.

⁴⁶ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1992. Page 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid., page 24.

⁴⁸ See, *ibid.*, page 22.

process itself becomes political. This leads to the “*interventionism policy of the state of emergency.*” This leads to a kind of revolution from above – political power feeding on the fear of catastrophe. Ten years before Agamben’s proclamation of the becoming normal of the state of emergency, Beck wrote: “The risk society is thus not a revolutionary society, but more than that, a *catastrophic society*. In it the *state of emergency* threatens to become the normal state.” This leads to “a *scientific and bureaucratic authoritarianism.*” Beck also labels this a “dictatorship of dangers.”⁴⁹

Section 7: Vulnerability and Security - A Renewed Role for Ethics

The three perspectives on the security-situation of late modernity, Dillon, Agamben, and Beck, together paint a rather bleak picture of current conditions. Looking around us, however, they may be seen to reflect serious developments with regard to finance, climate, and nuclear proliferation. Again, as we have continued to do since 2001, and surely, before that, we are faced with a double choice. We can either see the growing sense of shared vulnerability as a possibility to revisit the ethical foundation of the human, seeing human vulnerability not as a sad fact, but as the possibility of being touched by the lives and fates of one another. We can then slowly begin, because this is not an overnight project, to build a global citizenship involving responsibilities, freedoms, rights, and duties. We would then perceive our shared global fate, not as a threat, but as an opportunity to build a common and sustainable future. The risk we then would be taking is the misuse of our trust.

Or, we can place our hopes in the expectation that the next tightening turn of the security wheel will provide that which previous turns have only removed further away. We can in this way meet any perceived threat to national security and interests with our military, economic, and technological supremacy. We can trust those scientists, and the politicians relying on them, which can help us to interpret away the risks following an unsustainable lifestyle. The risk we then would be taking is the possibility that the leaders we elect would promote ideologies of an isolationist realism internationally, and a liberal society domestically, but would in practise be forced into an expansive foreign policy, and an increasing policy of intervention into spheres of our existence that were previously deemed non-political. The

⁴⁹ For all this, see, *ibid.*, page 78-79.

almost socialist intervention in the financial market today, in my view follows from the unwillingness to regulate the same market in the first place.

Human vulnerability is exposed in its extremity under a growing awareness of a perceived threat of an uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear technology and arms. It brings us close to a self-perception of being bare life living a camp-like existence in a state of emergency. This can blind us to the inconsistency of a politics of aggression where our leaders are given more or less unlimited power to renew the arsenal of nuclear weapons in order to scare other nations from acquiring the same weapons. In my view, there is no other way out of such a situation than to reactivate that ancient wisdom hidden in our shared vulnerability, saying that our common fate also includes opportunities, and that sometimes the strongest party should take the first step to make those opportunities real. In this constituting role of the human, vulnerability is moral before it is mortal.

Section 8: Vulnerability and Faith

I will end this paper by addressing the question of how these questions relate to the role of religious communities in general, and to the churches in particular. Allow me in some of the passages that follow to enter a more prophetic tone while addressing you as believers. Let me start by saying that my faith stays very close to this interpretation of the present situation and the role of vulnerability as countering the dominating approach to security. Paul says, in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1, 27-28): “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are.”⁵⁰ This sums up the gospel of Jesus, and in many ways the biblical message as such. Throughout the Bible vulnerability is the one thing calling us to be responsible and to do good. In the Old Testament we find the repeated references to the orphans, the widows and the strangers and the cries of the prophets accusing the rich of paganism when disregarding the poor. In the New Testament human vulnerability is the guiding thread. Jesus was born as a defenceless and poor child. Through deeds and words he spent his life opting for the poor. The parable of

⁵⁰ http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book_id=53&chapter=1&version=50. Last Accessed. September 10, 2008. Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

the Good Samaritan and his words in the final judgement, ‘what you did to one of the least of these, you did it to me’, is only two references out of countless ones. His story ends with the lifting up and the nailing to the cross of the vulnerable and wounded God, the vulnerable and wounded human, for all to see, at all times.

Contrary to the contention of political realism, the call going out from the gospel of Jesus is not restricted in its validity only to the private sphere and to the coming kingdom of God. It is valid also in the public and political sphere, nationally and internationally. Surely, these spheres are complicated, and we will always have to accept compromises, but to disregard the radical message going out from a vulnerable and wounded God would come close to disbelief. In this message is hidden the secret and possibility of reconciliation, of responsibility and of love. Without it everything important becomes dehumanised – truth, ethics and religion – life itself.

I will also indicate, although this is outside my special field of knowledge, that this message has points of attachment also in other religions. The word “Islam” means both self-limitation and subjection to the goodness of God *and* peace and peace at the same time. The words central to the self-understanding of the Jewish people as elected says: “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you.”⁵¹ And we could also point to the fact that dominant readings of the Bhagavad Gita, such as e.g. that of Mahatma Gandhi, would see human perishability as a ground for selfless action. In a more general approach, religion itself, as a relation to a determining transcendent reality, involves a sense of original passivity as constituting a central feature of the human condition. This in itself opens a perspective where human affectivity and vulnerability is seen as strength and a possibility, and not only as a weakness.

Moreover, I will claim, there exists a shared human experience that crosses borders of religions and cultures, and that tells us that accepting our own vulnerability, and seeing the vulnerability of the other person as a call to goodness is part of the most precious human wisdom. We have experienced it, carrying a new-born child, sitting by a death-bed, ending the

⁵¹ Deuteronomy 7,7. New King James version. Accessed through: http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book_id=5&chapter=7&version=50. Last Accessed. September 10, 2008. Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

hard-to-get play of falling in love and admitting that I am desperately dependent on your love and respect, being forgiven, or forgiving. All these experiences have taught us that to only depend on superiority is not very often the way to a good life. In a globalized age, this experience, and this wisdom comes to bear also on our political existence. A generally shared sense of vulnerability could thus open up an inter-cultural and inter-religious reflection on the basic state of being human.

More and more areas of existence have been drawn into a self-conception determined by technology, calculability, reason, and security understood as predictability. Churches and religious communities exist as lacunas in such a world. Here the openness to ancient wisdom, to genuine human experiences, and to a transcendent call to justice, right and a genuine human life subsist. Today, this call is reaching us with regard to shared threats to our common future on earth; climate change, nuclear proliferation, and a system of unsustainable sharing of resources.

How should we react to this call, as persons and as churches? Should we say ‘I am too young, too immature and I do not understand’? The call issuing from the vulnerable other that has fallen through all the safety nets of the current security order is ultimately the call from Christ, the call to make whole what is broken, the call to reconcile. The glowing stones touching our lips are the burning issues of a politics that does not turn its back to see the victims in its trail. The glowing stones are touching our lips, and there is none but one answer possible: Here I am. I will follow. I will speak. I will witness. Send me.