The risk of 'risk'

We live in a culture of fear. Any healthy society has an inevitable level of risk. We must learn to fear rightly and respond properly to risk, fostering courage and resilience and giving voice to those who bear the most risk.

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Risk-assessment and risk-management are corporate requirements familiar to anyone working in fields as diverse as, for example, education, construction or criminal justice. Television news and advertisements inform us that we are at risk from almost everything – the earth being hit by an asteroid, our being a victim of crime, or foods we were brought up on harbouring hitherto unknown toxins. Our response is to dutifully play our role as vulnerable soon-to-be-victims or victims-deserving-compensation. At the same time, the media stir us up to moral panic and pillory the expert who refuses to give a '100 per cent guarantee' that something is safe, containable or avoidable. Gullibility, ignorance, prejudice and fear propel us to demanding that 'something is done' with the result that our politicians rush to deploy the most sophisticated means proffered to them by the security industry for gathering as much data as possible from which to compute the level of risk.

Constructing 'risk'

Distributing 'risk'

'Risk' is our way of dealing with hazards and insecurities but should not be mistaken as simply an alternative term to 'danger'. Experts define risks in terms of statistical probability that is based upon their knowledge and interpretation of multifaceted factors. Risks are 'man-made hybrids' that 'combine politics, ethics, mathematics, mass media, technologies, cultural definitions and perception'.[1] In this way risk is defined and constructed within social relations which cannot be separated from the 'realities' of hazard or danger. Our exposure to risk is not uniform; being poor normally involves an abundance of risks, from many of which wealthier people can purchase freedom. On the other hand, risk is not distributed simply according to existing social or economic strata, as environmental pollution, for example, does not respect village or national boundaries. The more invidious aspect is society's failure to distinguish between the cultural and political attention that is paid to high-profile risks and the actual diffusion of risk.[2] A particular risk matters more because 'valuable' (middle class) citizens are exposed to it whilst the multiple risks, perhaps with a greater cumulative effect, facing a social underclass receive considerably less attention.

When risk dominates as a motivation for political action and we consume risk (as a market opportunity) ours becomes a 'risk society'.[3] This does not mean that our society is intrinsically more hazardous than the multiplicity of dangers faced by our forebears. The difference is that they did not think in terms of 'risk' by which they might control the future; they viewed dangers as either from God or took them for granted as part of a contingent world. It is we who are increasingly preoccupied with the future and thereby with our safety.[4] A paradigm shift is detectable from that of responsibility in the nineteenth century (prudence for oneself and charity for others) into solidarity in the twentieth (developing a welfare state and insurance systems for displacing cost of damage from an individual onto society or business) and into precaution in the

twenty-first century (compensation is no longer enough, prevention and criminal liability take centre stage).[5]

This is particularly evident in crime control which now includes (if not is dominated by) pre-emptive identification and management of people deemed to be at greater risk of offending than others of us. A 'public health' element has been introduced that demands preventive detention not because of what someone has done but because of who they are (the 'risky individual').[6] Mental health services also display an obligation to manage the future but, argues Nikolas Rose, the most worrying shift is not towards copious collection of data for identifying risky persons but the way in which professional subjectivity is being transformed. Mental health professionals are charged with risk assessment which has a bureaucratic logic, under the shadow of the law, that is not their own.[7] It is their professional obligation to protect people with mental health problems from 'the community' that becomes harder to articulate.

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Notes

1. U Beck, 'Risk Society Revisited: Theory, Politics and Research Programmes', in B Adam, U Beck, and J van Loon (eds.), *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2000), pp. 211–29, at p. 221.

2. U Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

3. Ibid.

4. A Giddens, 'Risk and responsibility', *The Modern Law Review* 62/1 (1999), pp. 1–10.

5. F Ewald, 'The Return of Descartes's Malicious Demon: An Outline of A Philosophy of Precaution', in T Baker and J Simon (eds.), *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* (Chicago & Longon: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 273–301.

6. N Rose, 'The biology of culpability: pathological identity and crime control in a biological culture', *Theoretical Criminology* 4/1 (2000), pp. 5–34, at p. 21.

7. N Rose, 'At risk of madness', in Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon (eds.), *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* (Chicago & Longon: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 209–37, at p. 222.

8. F. Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation* (revd edn.; London: Continuum, 2002).

9. F Furedi, *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*

Cultivating fear

We, 'the community', are perhaps at our most dangerous when frightened. It can be argued that we live in a 'culture of fear' that teaches us to believe the worst, disbelieve experts in favour of mavericks, and think of ourselves as primarily 'at risk'.[8] A culture and politics of fear goes hand-in-glove with disengagement from politics, epitomised in the 'there is no alternative attitude' with the result that others dominate our fate. In this paradigm of vulnerability, we think of ourselves as being 'at risk' which is passive in comparison to the active notion of 'taking a risk'. We have a reduced sense of what we can achieve, we become the 'vulnerable citizen' and politics becomes focused on what fear the public should worry about most. In this respect, it is arguable that it is the cultivation of vulnerability rather than of fear that predominates in our societies.[9] In this 'expanding empire of unknown danger'[10] we adopt a precautionary approach but this does not mean our behaviour is cautious. Rather, we are looking out for worst-case scenarios so that the stakes gets pushed higher and we demand action from government, agencies and corporations that is anything but cautious.[11]

In this febrile atmosphere that, most significantly, becomes the norm so that we begin not to notice it[12] the goodwill upon which much of liberal democracy depends is slowly withdrawn. With it goes the balance of rights so that 'the only rights that matter for most people are the safety rights of selves and loved ones'. We find it increasingly hard to accept the possibility that offenders might be rehabilitated and, even more worryingly,

once someone has been designated as 'risky' (even before they have offended) we block their way back to being a moral agent: 'the route from the fortress to the wilderness is one-way'.[13]

Risk is inherently risky. It views danger only in terms of what can be rendered in calculable indices and obscures risk's own uncertainty. But, as Lucia Zender argues, we ought not to lose sights of risk's positive contribution to the precautionary principles of environmental law, the virtues of uncertainty in people's decision-making in behavioural economics, some elements of pre-emption in international relations and its impetus for deliberative democracy that involves quantifiable and qualitative evaluation.[14] Nevertheless, we govern and are governed by fear; fear that is named and fed by our consumption of risk. It is into this broth that 'the terrorist threat' has been mixed. It did not initiate a 'risk society' and we ought not to make a false equation between the two and assume that addressing 'terrorism' is the solution to our state of anxiety.

Theologising 'risk'

Fearing well

A theological response to a culture of fear must resist a retreat into pious theodicy that, in some way or other, pitches the problem into the eschatological long grass. Scott Bader-Saye turns to Aquinas and Augustine in order that we might become more reflexive towards our fear. They enable us to see what it is that we love (for this is what we fear losing) and fear may awaken us to loves that we have taken for granted. Furthermore, we can consider how we might be fearing what we should not and how we are fearing what we should, but excessively. Unless we fear rightly we allow fear to draw us 'in on ourselves so that we "extend" to "fewer things"', we contract instead of, in Christian discipleship, expanding in charity and generosity.[15]

Along similar lines to learning to fear well, John Swinton proposes, in the broader context of facing hardships, that Christians need to develop 'theodic communities' who know how to practice theodicy; who have learned how to lament and to bear people up that they might suffer well.[16] Part of this will require learning to love things rightly lest we unwittingly follow those who burden temporal goods with hopes for our fulfilment that they cannot sustain. Daniel Bell expresses this release in his turn to Christ's cross as it 'clears a space for a politics of life, a politics of relentless affirmation, of ceaseless giving even in the midst of terror'.[17]

Sharon Welch takes us down a different route in her proposal of an ethic of risk in contrast to an erotic of domination. The will to control naturally has deleterious effects for those upon whom it is exercised in domination. More subtly, however, such an orientation comes up against the reality that control is not always possible. Whilst one response might be to attempt to exert more control, Welch identifies a parallel of surrender which she finds particularly in the 'cultured

despair' of the middle classes. Here liberation theology draws the current boundaries of human hope into view and challenges how and where these are drawn. To find what it means to practice risk Welch turns to the experiences of those who are resisting and reframing the suffering that is bearing down upon them. Such women risk with no guarantees of success and thereby constitute their selves by relationships founded in acts of resistance. For Welch, 'the recognition that we cannot imagine how we will change society is the beginning point, not the end, of an ethic founded on love for oneself and others.'[18] Cultured despair, what we might term a culture of fear, is overcome by learning hope — from, and with, those at the margins who are living it in resistance and celebration.

'Counting the cost'

It almost goes without saying that 'risk' understood as a hybrid of actuarial probabilistic calculation and socially constructed definition was unknown to the pre-modern age of the biblical witness. Therefore we must be cautious of transplanting 'risk' into the relationships and teachings of Jesus, but not at the expense of forgetting that the people of his time knew about dangers that could befall them from the heavens or from duplicitous or foolish members of their own or more powerful strata of society. To 'count the cost' is not to 'weigh up the risk' of following Jesus (cf. Lk 14.25—33). The former seems more a call to courage in the face of hardship whereas the latter is about trying to work out the likelihood of hardship with a focus on safety. Certainly, Jesus encourages his followers with the assurance that loss of family and life will be rewarded in heaven (Mt 19.29), but this is still surrender to God rather than deciding that, on balance, discipleship was probably worth the risk. Faithfulness is affirmed; 'risk-taking', at least as a disposition, does not feature. Warnings are issued to the foolish and rash but even these ought not be painted in terms of risk. With these caveats, when Gregersen suggests that at the cross 'God not only passively endures risks but also actively transforms the lives of those who lose in the game of risk-taking' we can reaffirm the bedrock upon which Christians act courageously in a contingent world.[19] However, a Christian response must go further.

Responding to 'risk'

The distribution of risk in the modern sense raises Christian consciousness to deep-seated inequities in our societies. A faithful response to risk demands directing attention to those who are unable to purchase safety. As a mundane but not unimportant example, where 'healthy options' on supermarket shelves may seem beyond the economic reach of many on low- or fixed-incomes, a theology of risk opens questions of systemic poverty that are not easily dismissed by casting aspersions at people's shopping habits. Similarly, a Christian approach to risk challenges the purveyors of fear whose business models rely on cultivating and maintaining levels of anxiety. Whilst at

a macro-level, building relationships with local ethnic or religious groups can foster the subversion of media representations of 'risky' communities and individuals.

When an uncritical absorbing of the ethos of a 'risk society' is used to legitimate ever more collection and analysis of information — in the hope of being sufficiently omniscient to pre-empt danger — Christians have a responsibility to take a more thoughtful approach. As a result of the abusive behaviour of some, the Church as a whole cannot approach the specific issue of protecting vulnerable people with anything but the utmost seriousness. However, handling 'risk' encompasses much broader aspects of contemporary life and the Church ought to be a network of communities that can model a better response to 'risk' than the frantic data-gathering, monitoring and compensation-readiness of wider society. Identifying the risk of 'risk' requires Christians to foster one another in courage and resilience whilst, at the same time, giving voice to and

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standing with those who bear the greater weight of the hybrid 'risks' arising in contemporary society. In so doing, we valiantly embrace God's beautiful and dangerous world.

Science and Faith: Do they overlap?

Bible Society has partnered with The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, Cambridge, to produce a new and original worship resource. This relates to their *Test of FAITH* materials, which connect the Bible to contemporary science based issues. These materials also feature testimony from many scientists, explaining there is no necessary conflict between Christian belief and science. The *service* resource, celebrating God as creator, includes liturgical materials, a model sermon, children's activities, downloadable DVD clips and PowerPoint presentations. This can all be found at biblesociety.org.uk/testoffaith

(London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 29, 131, 141.

10. F Furedi, *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 49.

11. Ibid., p. 71.

12. D Bigo, 'Security, exception, ban and surveillance', in D Lyon (ed.), *Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond* (Uffculme: Willan Publishing, 2006), pp. 46–68.

13. B Hudson, *Justice in the Risk Society: Challenging and Re-affirming Justice in Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 74, 76.

14. L Zedner, 'Neither safe nor sound? The perils and possibilities of risk', *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 48/3 (2006), pp. 423–34.

15. S Bader-Saye, 'Thomas Aquinas and the Culture of Fear', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25/2 (2005), pp. 95–108, at p. 106.

16. J Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI/ Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007).

17. DM Bell Jr, 'The politics of fear and the gospel of life', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 8/2 (2007), pp. 55–80, at p. 73.

18. S Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (revd edn.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), at p. 165.

19. NH Gregersen, 'Risk and religion: toward a theology of risk taking', *Zygon* 38/2 (2003), pp. 355–76, at p. 374.