

Illusions of Security

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Over the years I've gotten a good bit of mileage out of the "Peanuts" cartoons of Charles Schulz. In one that goes way back, Linus is pictured indoors, holding his blanket while calmly sucking his thumb. Then along comes Snoopy, who snatches one end of the blanket and bolts out the door, with Linus in tow. A major tug-o-war ensues as Linus and Snoopy tussle in the snow.

Finally, Linus regains control of his blanket and makes his bedraggled way back to the house, whereupon his sister, Lucy, berates him, "Are you crazy? It's **cold** outside! You could catch pneumonia rolling around out there in the snow!"

Warming himself at the hearth, Linus replies, "The struggle for security knows no season!"

Consider with me this morning how much we crave security. There are a myriad ways in which we try to make our lives secure. We have all kinds of security blankets of our own. We put locks on our doors. We have locks on our cars. We have safe deposit boxes. We place our money in accounts insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. We have life insurance, health insurance, liability insurance, long-term care insurance, even burial insurance. We have Social Security. We have passwords to protect our assets and our privacy. We have security lights and security systems to ward off potential intruders. We go through "security" every time we take an airline flight. In Bloomington one must even go through security to get into the Justice Building. Many of our fellow citizens live in gated communities, with security guards and security fences to keep unwanted people out. Many of our investments, on which we count for our income or our retirement or the unforeseen but inevitable contingencies of life, we call securities. The struggle for security knows no season, and sometimes—it seems—it knows no bounds.

Paul Scherer, a well-known preacher to an earlier generation, once proclaimed "that the fundamental urge of human life is the urge to get through this world, so manifestly a dangerous place as safely as may be. That's why we want homes, work and health. It's why many people want God really. We are looking for some kind of security." (THE PLACE WHERE THOU STANDEST, p. 39).

While I was still a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, some 35 years ago, I had an internship in an American Baptist Church in southeastern Ohio. I think that was where I first encountered the theological doctrine of eternal security. This is a doctrine that means "once saved, always saved." In other words, once things get right between you and God, then there is nothing that can ever destroy that relationship. There is nothing that can ever take away your salvation. There is nothing you can ever do to mess it up in permanent way. It's a doctrine, I discovered, that gives lots of people lots of comfort. If you are one of those people who has had an experience of being saved, or of being "born again," then you are home free. You never have to worry again about the state of your soul.

I didn't believe in eternal security then, and I don't exactly believe in it now. But I surely understand this desire, this great impulse, to be able to live with the conviction that the question of one's ultimate destiny has already been settled. I surely understand that it makes life a whole lot easier if one does not have to worry about the possibility of some absolutely fatal mistake. Life throws more than enough challenges at us every day. Every day is filled with plenty of uncertainty and ambiguity. All our earthly hopes and aspirations are so inescapably subject to the contingencies of existence that it's hard to muster much joy and vitality without some assurance that in the end all will be well.

But how do we know that this is not a case of "wishing makes it so"—or, "makes it seem so"? Sigmund Freud's critique of religion was, in large part, that it is an illusion. It is a form of wish-fulfillment. We believe what we want to believe, and hope what we want and need to hope. I take this to be a very serious critique of religion, but not a devastating one. After all, if there is a God, it would not make any sense for us to be creatures for whom God fills no need or desire. I find it absurd to think that this world might be one in which God exists but is superfluous! So if God is not superfluous, then that is no argument against the existence of God!

Religion is an illusion, however, when it imagines God in ways that reduce almost entirely to our human wishes and desires. We'd all like to be protected against the unhappy consequences of our mistakes and misdeeds. We'd all like to be rewarded for our efforts and good intentions. We'd all like to prosper and flourish. We'd all like to be healed of our infirmities and diseases. If we think that God exists to take care of all these things for us, then we're bound for great disappointment. Sometimes we pay for our mistakes, sometimes we don't, and sometimes we pay more for other people's mistakes than we do for our own. Life is not fair, and it doesn't always make sense. Good people get sick and die, while those who are not so good sometimes get away with murder. There is what moral philosophers call the "natural lottery", and it seems to bear little correspondence to our moral sensibilities. Some people are much better endowed with talent, good looks, hearty constitutions, than others. Some are born lucky, others can never seem to shake their bad luck. Since there doesn't seem to be a God who's in charge of making things right so far as our earthly estate is concerned, is it any wonder that we seek to find security in other ways? We must do something to protect ourselves from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune!

My thesis this morning is that the struggle for security in our society today is all out of proportion to our human capacity to protect ourselves from the vagaries of our existence. In the first place, the idea that we can actually achieve security in this life is an illusion. In the second place, our efforts to make ourselves secure have all the signs of an obsessive-compulsive disorder. And in the third place, the contemporary struggle for security in its most comprehensive form, that of national security, is a form of idolatry.

The ways in which we struggle for security, as I've suggested, are myriad. This morning I want to focus mainly on those ways that have become part of our public life since the horrendous events of September 11, 2001. It is my conviction that almost everything that has been done in the past 5 1/2 years in the name of protecting the American people from future disasters and threats like those we experienced on 9/11 has failed to make us safer. Most of it has been beside the point, and much has been counterproductive.

One of the most common rituals practiced by anyone who travels by air these days is the passage through airport security. I won't claim that this is a totally meaningless and ineffectual procedure, but it is surely more theater than substance. As columnist Dan Martin wrote in Canada's *National Post* this past Thursday, "Nothing beats the folly of airport X-ray technicians seizing a passenger's nail clipper or, in my recent case, a divot repair thingy only to chortle like they've prevented a hijacking. Any two bit terrorist need only smash a wine bottle on the serving trolley and they could use the shards to far deadlier effect."

I don't agree with the case that Martin goes on to make in support of Canada's anti-terrorist legislation, but I've often had very much the same thought about the futility of most airport security measures when it comes to stopping a determined hijacker. Even more to the point, what is to prevent the future terrorist from blowing up a train, a bus, a subway, or a passenger ferry, rather than an airline? In a free society it is impossible to screen every passenger on every public transport. In a free society it is impossible to restrict the movement of every individual who might decide to put a bomb in a backpack and head for a strategic urban center. In a free society, there is no way to protect all the lakes and reservoirs that supply the water to the largest population centers. In a free society there is no way to inspect every crate on every shipping dock. If there is such a thing as security in a free and open society, it cannot be achieved by measures that close off access, prevent movement, and restrict exchange, for then such a society ceases to be open and free.

Back in September I flew to Montreal to attend a Worlds Religions Congress and to present a paper on torture. We had to change planes in Toronto, and that meant we had to go through Canadian security in the Toronto airport. At one point we passed this table laden with all sorts of bottles of various kinds of fluids. I imagine they were shampoos and conditioners and lotions and such. In any case, we were asked if we had anything like these in our possession – in our carry-on luggage. I thought to myself, how absurd! As if any of these things could possibly pose a threat. And as if anyone who possessed anything that could pose a threat would admit it. This screening process had little to do with making us passengers more secure. It was all theater. The precipitating event, a year or two ago, when an airline passenger was found to have some fluids that could potentially be made into an explosive, had been blown all out of proportion. Subsequent analysis confirmed that it would be next to impossible successfully to mix chemicals on board an airline in order to achieve the intended explosive capacity. It's pretty hard to replicate a laboratory procedure in an airline seat, or even in the toilet! As a society it seems we have become so obsessed with security that we compulsively implement all kinds of measures to make us feel more secure, whether they really do makes us more secure or not.

One has to wonder, in this light, whether the ultimate purpose of such bogus security measures is not to make us more submissive, docile, and conforming. While standing in line one must even be careful not to be overheard cracking a joke about such airline security measures, or one risks being singled out for questioning, detained and prevented from boarding one's flight. The regimentation and inconvenience of airline travel is one thing, and of relatively minor concern to me. What really concerns me is the way in which we have allowed our government to implement all kinds of other far more odious measures in the name of security.

I spend a significant amount of my time researching U.S. torture practices as well as the wider public

discourse that has emerged in response to the events of 9/11. It is horrifying to observe what has been taking place in our country in recent years. It is clear that 9/11 has been the pretext for a whole raft of policies and actions that are fundamentally hostile to traditional democratic values and principles. In the name of national security our country invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. In the name of national security, Congress passed the already previously drafted Patriot Act. In the name of national security, our military has rounded up tens of thousands of suspected terrorists and terrorist supporters, most of them merely victims of circumstance. In the name of national security these detainees have been labeled “unlawful enemy combatants” so we do not have to abide by the Geneva Conventions in their treatment. They are neither criminals nor prisoners of war, so the administration can pick and choose what standards it wants to flaunt in their treatment. In the name of national security thousands of these detainees have been tortured, abused, sexually humiliated, and cruelly mistreated. In the name of national security they have been denied the most fundamental of human rights, including the rights of habeas corpus and free speech. Some of them, like Jose Padilla, a U.S. citizen held captive for almost five years now, have apparently been deliberately and systematically destroyed as human beings. As his case has shifted to different courts, the charges against Padilla keep changing. The overwhelming majority of the detainees in places like Guantanamo have had no formal charges filed against them whatsoever.

There is now a movement under way to close down Guantanamo. Pray that it succeeds. There was only one reason for turning Guantanamo into a prison for so-called enemy combatants – so that things could be done to them under U.S. auspices that would clearly be illegal if done on American soil. Even so, it is only by disregarding international law, including the Geneva Conventions and the U.N. Convention Against Torture, that any pretext of legality can be maintained regarding the treatment of Guantanamo’s prisoners.

This is to say nothing of the administration’s blatant disregard of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act by its warrant-less and unauthorized wiretapping. The administration’s proposed budget for next year calls for \$1 billion for the so-called Secure Border Initiative to build a virtual fence between the United States and Mexico. Additional millions are being requested for heightened surveillance activities and expanded data mining and analysis. Civil libertarians aptly warn that we are becoming a surveillance society. Meanwhile, billions more are needed to sustain the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And before long we may be attacking Iran.

In *Federalist Paper #8*, Alexander Hamilton, one of the more conservative architects of the U.S. Constitution, wrote:

The violent destruction of life and property incident to war; the continual effort and alarm attendant on a state of continual danger, will compel nations the most attached to liberty, to resort for repose and security to institutions which have a tendency to destroy their civil and political rights. To be more safe, they, at length, become willing to run the risk of being less free.

I am most concerned about the havoc and destruction that our nation seems willing to inflict upon the lives of others in the name of national security. In response to the deaths of some 3,000, we have destroyed the lives of hundreds of thousands. And in the process we have only increased the threats of

terrorism in our world.

But I am also greatly concerned about the extent to which we have acquiesced, in the name of security, to the compromising of our own civil rights, the restrictions on our own freedoms, and the corruption of our constitutional rule of law. Frederick Douglass once wrote, “Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have the exact measure of the injustice and wrong which will be imposed on them.” In the current context I take this to mean that we cannot expect those who hold power, including our own political leaders, to be benevolently self-constrained. Therefore it is up to the people to refuse to submit to their government’s otherwise inevitable usurpations of power.

We are faced with an administration that believes in the prerogatives of power, not the power of the people. We have an Attorney General who claims that the Constitution does not contain the right of habeas corpus. We have a President who thinks he can re-write the law, or refuse to abide by it, by his numerous signing statements. We have a Vice-President who claims we are being successful in Iraq. And they all argue that we put ourselves at risk, and give aid and comfort to the terrorist enemy, when we press our disagreements with them.

National security has become the *raison d’etre* of our national political regime. It has become the god, the idol, the ultimate concern! I wonder, to invoke Freud, what is the future of this illusion? One of the early epitaphs of Communism was “the God that failed”. National security has become our god, and it is an illusion, and it is failing. Ironically, in many ways the security we find in home, work, and health has been diminished along the way.

I write a monthly column for the Saturday religion page of the *Bloomington Herald-Times*. Last Saturday I called into question our country’s motto, “In God We Trust.” I have some qualms about giving public sanction to this explicitly theological affirmation. But what most disturbs me is that this affirmation is simply not true. Would that we did trust in God! – and not in our wealth, not in our power, not in violence, not in the American Way, like it or not, love it or leave it.

We have made of the nation-state, of its security and of our security as its citizens, a near-absolute and ultimate value. No nation-state deserves such tribute. No nation-state can bear the weight of all our human aspirations. No nation-state can ultimately endure. We need to be dis-illusioned. This will not be easy. Our country is still trying to get over the debacle of Viet Nam, and the loss of innocence that it brought upon us. Now we will also have to get over Iraq, and its horrendous tragedies. Let us hope that beyond our disillusionment we can envision a world, and a path, that will continue to give meaning to our struggle and joy and vitality to our days.

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