Terrorists, Security, and the Risk of Peace: Toward a Moral Vision

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I watched in amazement in front of my television set as the security specialist on a late-night news special explained the recent advances in airport security. The new technology available for identifying potentially dangerous individuals or for detecting efforts at smuggling explosives or weapons aboard a commercial airliner seemed impressive. At the conclusion of the program, the interviewer asked the question that I am sure was on the minds of many viewers: “Won’t the terrorists find a way of outsmarting this technology?” With absolute confidence, the master of security answered without hesitation: “We are smarter than the terrorists.”

Perhaps, for now at least. But how long will it take before even greater advances in technology are needed to outsmart a terrorist force that is growing in knowledge (in part, by watching news specials on television!)? And what further limitations on our freedom and peace of mind will we be forced to accept in the ongoing effort to ensure security by staying one step ahead of an increasingly educated network of people bent on striking at civilian populations without notice? In the process of this escalation of terrorist and anti-terrorist technology, what kind of world will we create for our children? Will we end up in an existence so imprisoned in security systems that paranoia becomes a way of life? The irony here is that our technological success over the terrorists may end up with their accomplishing their goals against us. Isn’t the terrorist campaign really meant to make us our own worst enemies, to place us in a perpetual state of fear and watchfulness?

If so, their campaign is working. The terrorists have all of the media...
attention they could ever want to maintain their psychological intimidation of the general populace. As we constantly hear the unsettling news of how many ways the terrorists could strike us successfully, we wonder how many of them are taking notes. Irrational fear seems pervasive. For example, although our attack on Iraq was most likely motivated by a desire to complete what was begun at Desert Storm and to reconfigure the boundaries of that part of the world, it now seems that this administration was primarily motivated by a paranoid response to faulty intelligence. Our response to terrorist enemies seems to be dominated by compulsive fears and perceived needs for self-preservation. We are told that we are becoming more secure, but our ongoing speculation through the media about where terrorists might strike next reveals hidden doubts about how secure we really are. Meanwhile, this administration seeks to build confidence by casting our struggle with the terrorists as a moral struggle between good and evil in which we are unambiguously on the side of the good. This moral certitude is supposed to grant us the assurance of victory. For me, however, it only raises greater doubts.

In the midst of this situation, I cannot help but to call to mind Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s insight into peace as a “risk,” a great “venture.” It seems that from the moment the terrorists struck on September 11 we were willing to risk very little. We simply hearkened back to a foreign policy shaped during decades of cold war of relying predominantly on the appearance of strength to maintain the peace. If the nuclear arms race has taught us anything, it has taught us that an approach to our enemies dominated by a show of strength through an ongoing improvement of our weapons systems against them will not make us more secure. And yet, we continue on this present course of thinking that the more we invest in defense and the harsher we deal with our enemies the safer we will be. The only moral vision allowed within the confines of this response to our enemies is one that casts us as the good empire in a struggle against evil forces. The only choices available in this moral framework are either passive resignation or an aggressive campaign motivated by self-preservation.

But Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the risk of peace was different. His was a moral vision informed by the cross. The risky venture toward peace of which he spoke was by no means self-assured, but deeply aware of the fact that we are sinners facing moral ambiguities. For Bonhoeffer, it is the forgiveness of sins that gives us the courage to act, and the goal of action is not simply self-preservation but peace and justice for all. In this moral vision, the way forward is neither passive resignation nor an aggressive