

How safe can we be?

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

Heated debates about whether a Muslim cultural center with a mosque should be built in the proximity of Ground Zero are about many things-- about freedom, memory of atrocity, prejudice and American identity; about rallying constituencies in the search for political power, and more. But none of these issues would be debated with nearly as much intensity if the underlying issue were not security.

September 11, 2001, did not create an insecure world, but it became for us an indicator, a symptom of the insecure world in which we live. Human beings have always lived with insecurity, but today's world has its own peculiar forms of it. Some time ago, German sociologist Ulrich Beck suggested that we live in a "risk society." Unlike in previous eras, he says, when the majority of our risks came from natural sources, today the majority of our risks are "manufactured." We humans create them. Most involve technological innovation, which always takes us into new and unpredictable situations. For example, a few years back the news reported that "higher levels of chemicals often found in plastic food and drink packaging are associated with cardiovascular disease." Plastic packaging, which had seemed a useful invention, was exposed as a danger.

Surrounded by risks, we seek to reduce them, even eliminate them. It is not only that the loss of any life is one loss too many; now the loss of anything of value is loss that we cannot accept. Our goal is inviolability, total security. From one perspective this seems like the most natural of goals. But is it? Can we ever achieve inviolability? And even if we can, what would it cost us? We often think of economic costs in this regard (as we should, since in our overreaction to 9/11 we have squandered billions in the name of security). But I have in mind primarily human costs, costs to us as we try to "securitize" ourselves, and costs to our neighbors.

Security is important to us because of our vulnerability. If we were not vulnerable, the question of security would never even arise. I am a theologian, and I can say with some degree of confidence that God needs no security force to protect God's throne. God is by definition inviolable. Human beings are not. To be human is to be

vulnerable. Vulnerability is the essential condition of human life. No vulnerability, no human life.

We are always threatened, and we need our existence and our well-being secured. That's why lights flash on school buses when kids get on and off; that's why we lock our homes; that's why we have a police force. That's why in the scripture the psalmist praises God as his "rock" and the book of Revelation portrays the New Jerusalem as a city so secure that enemy armies can never overcome it.

Vulnerability touches on security in another way. It places a limit on how much we can secure ourselves, and it determines in part the nature of what it means to be secure. We tend to think that the more secure we are, the better off we'll be. But inherently vulnerable people in an essentially fragile world with finite resources can never be fully secure.

First of all, simply trying to achieve maximum security may be problematic. Consider the consequences of the use of technology; paradoxically it actually increases our vulnerability—a point that came into focus for me in conversations with Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, whose Two Futures Project focuses on nuclear threat reduction. We seek security by deploying weapons developed with the latest technology. But every new means of security challenges others to undermine that security and leads us to find yet another means of achieving security. We are made vulnerable not just by external threats but by the means we seek to keep them at bay. There is the potential of an ever-escalating threat, and therefore the potential of increased vulnerability.

Second, let's say we believe that we have achieved a high degree of security, an invulnerability against all actual and potential enemies. Would this not insulate us from others, enclose us in a fortress? Given our propensity to misuse power, wouldn't we be likely to endanger others? We would likely walk through the world with a John Wayne swagger, not taking into account the interests of others but remaining oblivious to their experience of our presence and actions in the world and scorning the idea of adjusting our behavior to theirs. Even more disturbing, we could live comfortably with our prejudices about others, unperturbed by actual facts about them.

Which brings me back to that Muslim cultural center with a mosque near Ground Zero. Many of those who oppose the center are broadcasting prejudices of colossal proportions as plain verities. Totally blind to the truth, they declare all Muslims to be

terrorists and see Islam as terrorist ideology. Why? Partly because, armed by military prowess, they think they can afford to walk through the world with self-assured swagger.