**Chapter 9 b**

**The Theology of Risk**

**Introduction**

The prompt for this paper came from my attendance at a presentation to Archdeacons on climate change. The thesis of the presenter was that:

1. dealing with the problems caused by further climate change, if nothing is done, would cost the world about 2.5% of global GDP;
2. reducing carbon to prevent further climate change would also cost the world about 2.5% of global GDP;
3. however, if (the poorer) half of the world doesn’t join the effort to reduce carbon, then the cost to the other (rich) half would be 5% of GDP – but the cost of not doing anything would still be 2.5%
4. therefore it is unlikely that anything will be done;
5. this assumes that nothing catastrophic happens – but we don’t really know this – except that we can guess that the problems will affect the poor more than the rich;
6. therefore we may arrive, having done nothing, at a situation where something needs to be done very rapidly;
7. we ought therefore to be developing technology and capacity do to take that rapid action;
8. one candidate is to disperse microscopic (and smaller) particles of titanium dioxide in the upper atmosphere: (this is a widely used chemical – for example in white paint); it would reflect the sun reducing the amount of heat radiated to the earth – a phenomenon which has happened several / many times in the past (eg after very very large volcanic eruptions) – causing the temperature to drop; the dispersal could be done by pumping the particles up large tubes attached to very high-flying balloons.

The speaker challenged the Archdeacons to consider what the Church could do. One point he made was that getting politicians to agree to a program of developing technology and capacity would be very difficult. Could the Church help?

I don’t intend to discuss the solution proposed. One problem with it is that there are too many things we don’t know about the atmosphere and how such particles would be dispersed.

Instead I wish to consider a theological reflection on the idea of risk.

Such a theological reflection would touch other situations – for example: the use of nuclear power; ways in which the church might deal with its present decline; dealing with offenders;

**Initial issues**

We know that people are very risk averse and very poor at estimating and dealing with risk. For example, people buy Lottery Tickets – when they have a greater chance of a fatal accident with a piece of office equipment. People worry about terrorism attacks and epidemics and a myriad of relatively unlikely events, but without thinking drive in cars – where the chance of a fatality is many times greater. We are more disturbed by the possibility of a very unlikely but very bad outcome (eg a nuclear accident) than by a much less bad outcome where the disaster accumulates over lifetimes.

A rule of thumb is that: if the odds for an event are 10-to-one, you’ll see it this week; if it’s 100-to-one, you won’t see it this week, but you will see it this year. If it’s 1000-to-one you won’t see it this year, but you will probably see the event once. Anything more than that - 10,000-to-one, 100,000-to-one – and you will never see it. It will happen to someone, but never to you.

At the same time, it is more likely than not, that in a room of 23 people, two share a birthday; to improve the odds of a shared birthday to 99.9% you need just 75 people. The difficulty of believing this is another aspect of our inability to intuit odds and probability.

**Theological reflection**

* God taking risks with “creation” – how many chance events (even catastrophes) led to the world/universe we now inhabit?
* importance of danger and liminality : evolution (and exciting change) happens on the boundaries and borders between environments
* order and chaos – we see God as orderly – but perhaps this is not correct
* our world view is formed in a very stable and risk averse place; Britain has, in some senses, not seen a revolutionary change in the way it runs in the last nine centuries. The world view of other people, from more dangerous or much less stable places, may be different – and perhaps they are in the majority.
* better understanding of ourselves
	+ recognising and accepting our fallibility; we accept anecdote above evidence;
	+ we think of ourselves as a stable peak of creation – we’re probably not, although some people think that we may have halted human evolution
* importance of children learning about risk – in order to cope with world/be independent
	+ Andy Kirkpatrick (mountaineer) taking 13yr old daughter up “mountain” on R4
	<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04nv97g>
* God taking risks with us: the scandal of particularity, the risk of the incarnation
* risk of relationship – relationships built on trust but need to take risks to initiate them
* risk management of offenders – linked to forgiveness

**Bibliography**

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3. Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk Taking: Niels Henrik Gregersen (publ internet) <http://www.glerl.noaa.gov/seagrant/ClimateChangeWhiteboard/Resources/Uncertainty/Mac1/gregersen03.pdf> *(considers the issues of risk in our present ministry environment)*
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<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/27659669?uid=3738032&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21105186844993> *(one should regard the principle of risk as the surer way in case of doubt)*
5. God who risks: A Theology of Providence: John Sanders (publ Inter-Varsity Press 1998)
6. Theology of work : no author given <http://www.theologyofwork.org/key-topics/finance/the-foundations-of-finance-are-created-by-god/we-are-risk-takers/> *(we have an innate ability to balance risks and rewards; benevolent God invites and rewards risk-taking)*