

# TOWARDS A “RESTORATION OF TRUST”?

Preliminary Insights and Lessons  
from Wisdom Traditions

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DAVID W. MILLER, PH.D.<sup>1</sup> AND MICHAEL J. THATE, PH.D.

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We cannot walk out the door without entering into a series of exchanges structured by trust. This is what sociologists refer to as the unavoidability of social relations. Our actions and interactions in society are guided along through a framework of trust, however latent, implicit, or subconscious it may be. At a personal level, this framework allows us to envision, to predict, and to pursue individual and communal conceptions of the good life. At an institutional level, trust is a non-material asset on which material success depends. And yet trust never stands alone. It is embedded within a dynamic field of interrelated and interdependent forces. In this sense, trust, when intact, remains invisible. It is made visible when one or more players in that field breach that trust—whether intentionally or unintentionally. Based on the severity and repetition of that breach, a crisis eventually occurs, resulting in a trust deficit that may not be reparable. Such a breakdown in trust can be on an intimate level, say in a marriage. Or on a communal level, say between neighbors. Or even on a national level, say between political parties. It can also take place on an institutional level, say between a company and its customers, when the customer believes the organization hid, downplayed, or denied possible dangers associated with its products. Talk of trust is thus an invitation to reflect on its breakdown and the possibility of repair.

That is what we explore in this paper. Can a company restore trust with its customers, regulators, and other stakeholders—especially if the organization has a product that has caused damage and a checkered history that is etched in people’s minds and experiences? Companies often turn to lawyers, lobbyists, public relations personnel, crisis managers, social media experts,

<sup>1</sup> I, David W. Miller, serve as an independent, external ethics advisor to Philip Morris International (PMI) and am compensated for my counsel. I was asked by PMI to write a white paper considering the question of “the restoration of trust” in a corporate context, drawing on wisdom literature found in various religious traditions. This project and preliminary white paper is not about any specific organization; rather, it is written for any institution interested in fresh ways to think about the restoration of trust. Nor is it prescriptive in nature; each organization’s context, history, and approach will vary. I engaged my colleague Michael J. Thate to support me in this project; he is independent of PMI and does not have a direct relationship with them, nor do any other scholars with whom we spoke. The research methodology and subsequent findings and views represented in this preliminary white paper are the authors’ only and were not influenced by nor do they necessarily reflect the views of PMI. Nor do they necessarily represent the views of Princeton University, where I serve on the faculty and lead a research team exploring contemporary questions at the intersection of faith and work with a particular accent on values, ethics, and character-based leadership in the marketplace.

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and other such specialists to try to clean up their reputation and restore trust. Some make restitution—whether legally required or voluntarily. The public, however, often remains skeptical, suspicious of spin and further manipulation, and becomes even more unwilling to trust again. Indeed, many recent polls and articles in prominent journals refer to a “trust crisis” facing not just “big business” but also governments and other social institutions.

Perhaps it is time to consider other resources to help restore a broken trust with an institution’s primary stakeholders. In this reflection, we turn to a rich source of ideas and wisdom to help us consider fresh ways forward. Namely, we consider the resources that exist in various religious traditions. Many religions accent and place a premium on healing broken relationships between individuals and within their communities. To manage the scale of this inquiry, in this paper we focus primarily on the resources found in the three Abrahamic traditions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). We asked, “What can we learn from these ancient sources of wisdom about the restoration of trust for contemporary companies and other institutions that have injured and lost the trust of their customers, regulators, and other key stakeholders?”

The restoration of trust is the process by which trust returns to its embedded invisibility within the social cohesion of people’s lives. In effect, trust is restored when people no longer have to think about it; when it is taken for granted. It is a process of gradually relaxing down into something whole again. How does this happen? To put it simply: *time must pass*. To be clear, this is not a repetition of the tired cliché, “Time heals all wounds.” In instances of major traumatic injuries, no passage of time will make the wound whole. Time does not heal all wounds. It does, however, allow them gradually to scar over if the offender and the offended

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enter into a mutual relationship committed to repair. After making apology, demonstrating authentic contrition, and making appropriate structural changes ensuring the injury is not repeated, the offending party must bear responsible stewardship of the passing of time wherein they can demonstrate trustworthiness. The offended party, in turn, must let the wound scar—they must cease picking at it—and arrive at a choice whether or not to walk anew with the offending party or remove themselves from the relationship. Lost trust cannot be recovered. It must be built anew.

How, then, might an institution restore trust after it has been ruptured? In many respects, this is *the* question of our time, one that all CEOs and boards should be considering. A handshake between two individuals or corporate leaders is no longer deemed trustworthy or sufficient. Trust has been externalized, outsourced, and securitized through the contract and a growing litigious apparatus. Sadly, there have been several recent headlining cases of institutions across a range of industry sectors that breached even these externalized forms of trust. Sectors as diverse as aerospace, automotive, banking, commodities, government, media, and even professional services that purport to serve a common good have betrayed the public trust. Through misdeeds and charges of obfuscation, falsification, malevolent lobbying, and disingenuous denials, they have ruptured trust. Even religious institutions have lost trust when their behaviors deviated starkly from their own social teachings. The question of How to Restore Institutional Trust—again, *the question of our time*—however, must be asked alongside a series of other considerations. There is nothing an individual or institution can do to ensure the restoration of trust. It cannot be forced, imposed, or purchased. What one can do is *responsibly and wisely steward the passage of time wherein an institution can instill practices of transparency (and other practices*

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*presented below) in order to demonstrate its trustworthiness.*

Trust might be restored if the honesty and effectiveness of policies and practices of the organization show considerable and lasting improvement over time. Through the wise stewardship of the passage of time, trust can then return to its embeddedness and invisibility.

The theme of institutional trust—its constitutive parts, its loss, its repair—is a perennial challenge that has long been considered within varying genres of business scholarship. Such approaches typically have a transactional and conditional nature to them. If the offending company apologizes, makes some form of amends, and takes concrete actions to reassure stakeholders that it has put in place new policies and practices to ensure the offending acts will not be repeated, then the offended party is expected to forgive, and trust is restored. This is a logical and reasonable path. The problem with this “best practice” approach, however, is that it does not always work. The hurt, injury, and anger may be too deep to overcome. Perhaps something is missing from such traditional best practices approaches. That “something” may well be illuminated by religious traditions to help expand our thinking and approaches to repairing broken trust.

Religious traditions have amassed extraordinary wisdom and learning about human nature, brokenness, and healing. In the Abrahamic traditions, they often treat the restoration of broken relationships between God and humanity, and between the peoples themselves, as a major theme. In this paper, we consider afresh the presenting problem of “the restoration of trust” by looking through two lenses: business literature and the wisdom traditions of the Abrahamic religions, focusing primarily on the latter. Why consider wisdom from ancient religions in the

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question of trust, its breach, and its repair? Religious traditions invite the whole person into and open up a vast range of vistas and perspectives, dimensions, temporalities, spaces, practices, networks, and frameworks of choice that complement and aid in considering afresh the question at hand. It is precisely in their strangeness and difference that religious traditions offer distinctive resources and critical perspectives on perennial challenges to institutional life. By considering such perspectives, the frame for problem solving, creativity, and new ideas is expanded and enriched.

For these reasons, we gathered and spoke with a richly diverse group of scholars from a range of religious traditions, geographical locations, nationalities, ethnicities, races, genders, and fields of study to consider “the restoration of trust.” Our research methodology involved studying several religious texts and commentary traditions, hosting an in-person consultation of leading scholars, and conducting interviews with several other experts. We focused primarily on the three Abrahamic religions, ensuring that they were represented by international voices from North America, Latin America, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

A rich and robust range of theological resonances between and accents within the wisdom literature in the Abrahamic traditions gradually emerged. We list them thematically below in the form of Eleven Theses. Each thesis relates to and builds upon the others, culminating in a cohesive picture. We hope these preliminary ideas and the Eleven Theses provide fresh thinking, insights, and ideas to help corporations and other institutions move closer to a more holistic and sustainable rebuilding of trust.

## **ELEVEN THESES ON THE RESTORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL TRUST THROUGH THE LENSES OF THE THREE ABRAHAMIC TRADITIONS**

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[ 1 ]

### ***The path to restored trust begins with a commitment to demonstrating trustworthiness.***

Among the religious traditions with which we engaged, there exists a subtle tension between a deep suspicion and distrust of human nature on the one hand, and a vibrant hope for arriving at our highest capacities on the other. Put in the idiom of the Abrahamic traditions: we are simultaneously bent away from our best interests while at the same time created in the image of the Divine. This tension has produced a rich speculative thought-world, symbol system, and set of reparative practices. Consider two texts from the Jewish wisdom tradition: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” And, secondly, “What is humanity, that you are mindful of them, and the son of man that you visit him? For you have made humanity a little lower than the angels, and you have crowned them with glory and honor.” Life is lived, according to these traditions, along the tightrope of deception and divinity. As it relates to the question of trust, it is important to make clear: *the restoration of trust cannot be ensured*. Efforts are thus spent in the development of practices that allow for trustworthiness to be demonstrated over time. Though distinctive in signification,

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the wisdom of religious traditions places a high value on the development of practices that alert one to this tension while also habituating the self into a framework of flourishing within these tensions. Trust is not something for which one asks. It is a bestowal upon a relationship that has enacted its trustworthiness over time.

The restoration of trust is an appropriate leading question. It is not, however, the guiding question. The wisdom of religious traditions would phrase the guiding question along the lines of, “How can we as an institution develop practices that allow for the demonstration of trustworthiness over time?”

[ 2 ]

### ***Practices of transparency enact and communicate system-wide contrition while also inviting offended parties back into relationship.***

Central to the rich wisdom of religious traditions is the invitation to an honest examination, confession, and confrontation both internally and externally of our motivations. The internal aspect is perhaps better known. One cannot effect sustainable change without *honestly* confronting the internal mysteries of human desire. To paraphrase the Abrahamic aphorism again, *who can know the human heart?* Or, as St. Paul declared, “...the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I do.” Or as the Qur’an phrases it various places, “We are full of doubt.” We miss the point if we think such wisdom texts are condemning humans as flawed and corrupt. Though speaking to our frailty and fragility, these texts and traditions also explore the wild,

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contradictory, and mysterious world of desire and will. Why do we do the things we do? Why do we not do the things we don't want to do? Why do we act against our best interests? Honest examination, confession, and confrontation within the internal dimension of subjectivity considers questions of motive, desire, and character.

How does an institution restore trust after it has been broken? Part of that repair—if the offending party decides to go forward—is the development of practices of transparency. An institution's defensive inclination to spin, obfuscate, deny, and falsify is counteracted by a vigilant cultivation of practices of transparency. This vigilance consists of an honest self-examination, confession, and confrontation about the processes, pressures, and the nature of the product that unwittingly encourage a lack of transparency. This leads to remediation of broken systems. Just as religious traditions invite individuals and communities to embark on a trust journey, so too could companies and other institutions invite their customers and other stakeholders to participate in a collaborative, reparative relationship. The restoration of trust is a long obedience in a shared direction. And practices of transparency help guard institutions from repeating the defensive instincts and postures of mishandled opportunities for trust.

In many companies embarking on this path, intense internal reflection has taken place, sometimes over many years, seeking to learn from and address their well-documented breaches of trust. For some, it results in a redesign of their business model and a commitment to transform themselves. Even so, going forward, consideration must still be given to the role of continued, honest self-examination, confession, and engagement, with its external-facing processes and communications. Cultivating practices of

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transparency enact and communicate system-wide contrition while also inviting offended parties back into relationship. Such practices will help reestablish trustworthiness over time.

[ 3 ]

***Religious “conversion” provides a model for sustainable and lasting institutional transformation.***

Each of the Abrahamic traditions speaks of the need for a humbling moment within the redemptive arc of the individual and institution. “Humble yourself in the presence of the Lord. And the Lord will restore you.” The institution needs to linger in its humbling moment longer than it may wish if it sincerely desires restoration in the eyes of the general public. A recurring theme in this paper is the wise stewardship of the passage of time. In relationships where trust has been broken, a key consideration is who bears the burden of the passage of time during the period of transformational change. The spatial-temporal rhythms of the corporate world impose severe challenges on the duration of this lingering. Quarterly targets must relentlessly be met. Without satisfactory profits the company itself could slide into a slow death spiral leading to bankruptcy, loss of jobs, harm to families and communities, and loss of government tax revenues. The religious language of conversion may prove fruitful here. Conversion is a turning around, a change of direction, a radical becoming of something otherwise. Religious texts speak of this as receiving new hearts, new eyes—that is, a new organ of perception. They also speak of it in terms of becoming a new human, a new species, being born anew. To help sustain these

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new hearts, Abrahamic wisdom reminds us that individuals and institutions can design supporting ethical practices. Such practices recognize three modalities of ethics: preventive ethics (cultivating ethical habits and self-awareness); lived ethics (having norms and frameworks to address ethical dilemmas); and restorative ethics (as outlined in these Eleven Theses).

The significance of this for an institution seeking to rebuild trust is that it must not waste its humbling moment by returning to business as usual. If a company stewards this time well, it asks: How might this humbling moment lead to a conversion of institutional consciousness? How might this humbling moment lead to genuine transformation within the structures of leadership, product development, and the metrics of success that allowed for the prior actions that resulted in a breach of trust to occur in the first place? Of the many insights which emerged during our research, this was perhaps the most radical and celebrated: Whatever the institution that has a trust deficit—be it a corporation, a government, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), or even a religious institution—a genuine conversion requires a transformation of its very *life*! Painful as the process is, the organization must view its humbling moment as an invitation to be systemically born anew. Religious conceptions of conversion thus present a model for institutional change of the most radical, authentic, effective, and sustainable kind.

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***Practices of care for self and other are both necessary to restore a relationship.***

Religious traditions are attentive to care of self and care of the other. They enrich well-being at individual and communal levels. Extending this to a corporate context, practices of care are processes extended in time both to the offended parties *and the offending institution itself*. To love one's neighbor as one's self, as each of the Abrahamic traditions teaches, assumes a proper and healthy care for one's self. Toxic self-care invariably produces toxic neighborly-care. In caring for one's neighbor, the nature of that care must be welcomed and collaboratively determined. Important, too, is for the institution to process the shame and trauma loosed by its own past misdeeds so that it can be restored itself. The wisdom of religious traditions thus asks an empathetic question on this point: Is the institution caring for its future self? The wreckage of shame and trauma is that it often produces its opposite. That is, shame often covers itself by a protesting presence that prevents the shame from being cycled out of an institution's processes. In the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve, they hide, blame, and attempt to cover their shame instead of confronting it and taking responsibility for it. Institutions often do the same thing. Instead of looking inwards to engage and process their own shame and trauma, they obfuscate, play the blame game, and try to hide. The tragedy of such approaches is that they often produce additional harm.

A company must first understand its prior self and the self it aspires to be in order to develop healthy practices of care *for itself*. Otherwise the shame and trauma may never get properly

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processed and healed. Only then can it seek healthy ways to demonstrate care for its neighbor and offended parties. The process of inviting new trust requires candid self-reflection and a healthy new self-conception.

**[ 5 ]**  
***Trust is always historically contingent and specific. The Restoration of trust must therefore likewise be historically contingent and specific.***

Practices of repair must be both recognized and desired by those who have been offended. All three Abrahamic wisdom traditions warn against those who heal the hurt of the people of God “slightly.” In one text, we are warned of people who promise “peace, peace, when there is no peace.” The healing and peace offered by such parties is solely constituted by themselves and only in a singular form. The wisdom of these religious traditions reminds us that trust is always historically contingent and specific. Practices of repair must therefore likewise be historically contingent and specific. Some practices of repair will be understood, accented, and accepted differently from culture to culture. The models and processes of repair must be recognized within the cultural and linguistic idioms of the offended parties. It must be a “peace” that is recognized as such and is in fact a desired “peace.” In contrast, a false peace or a forced peace may help in some short-term ways but over time will actually increase the trust deficit.

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**[ 6 ]**  
***Lasting change is guided by a move away from a contractual mindset toward a covenantal mindset.***

Each of the Abrahamic traditions speaks of the necessity of law, while simultaneously voicing a deep suspicion of law. We get a glimpse of this in the recurrent refrains of the Psalms on how the Divine does not desire sacrifices—a legal and often ceremonial response to transgressions. Rather, the Divine wishes an elevated relationship, a covenantal one that is based on mutual trust and care. This is relevant in our increasingly litigious culture with respect to the manner in which trust is externalized in and replaced by the contract. Demonstrating trustworthiness cannot stop at the contractual meeting of legal obligation. Trust must return to its embedded invisibility within the cohesive structures of the institution itself. To return to the logic of sacrifice in the Psalms, the Divine does not desire sacrifices. Rather, Divine desire is for the Divine will to be done and for the law to be written on one’s heart—for the law to be internalized. The irony is that one who is truly obedient to the laws of the Divine *will offer appropriate sacrifices to the Divine*. The one who refuses appropriate sacrifices demonstrates they do not have the Divine law written on their heart. Sacrifice, however, is not the desire. An internalizing of the Divine will and law upon one’s heart is.

This relates to organizations seeking to rebuild trust in that the processes and practices of trust must never rest solely at the level of obligation and compliance. They are of course mandatory, but the Abrahamic traditions remind us they are not sufficient for sustaining trust. Organizations must seek to live, move, and

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have their being within the very structures of trust. That is, organizations must enact the language, culture, and practices of trust so as to demonstrate their trustworthiness beyond mere obligation and contract. The letter of the contract will never sustain the restoration of trust. The spirit of covenantal life, however, will.

[ 7 ]

***The need for institutional ritual ensures a continuity of commitment over time.***

Companies are frequently in transition, changing organizational structures, product lines, leadership, employees, and even ownership through mergers and acquisitions. This makes it hard to remember the oral history of good times and bad, successes and failures, and the lessons learned from each. Religious ritual enables institutions and their members to remember the stories of old, while embodying the lessons they hold for today. Trust is all about a certain type of memory. Ritual is the production of memory and the appropriate forms of forgetting that enables communities to move forward in cohesive and productive ways. Communal formation and maintenance are carried along by ritual as the means of producing shared memory, forms of cleansing, and release from prior transgressions. Ritual is an attempt at arriving at a shared understanding of the past—one that is jointly articulated between grieving parties.

This is a bold idea as it relates to an organization and its desire to rebuild trust and the concomitant parallels. How might institutional rituals develop practices of remembrance and

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commitments to restoring trust after it has been damaged? Developing intentional rituals creates spaces of listening, narrating, vulnerability, healing, and hope. Ritual also introduces rhythms of commemoration and celebration of the repair in process. A major creative effort may be in order along these lines: How might a company or institution ritualize practices at the level of institutional processes of memory, forgetting, contrition, making amends, commemoration, and celebration?

[ 8 ]

***Institutional history always already contains its own resignifications.***

Central to any religious tradition is its view of its own history as open to resignification. That is, religious traditions speak of a certain, constructive retelling of its past as a communal survival strategy, giving it ongoing and fresh significance. The need for constructing memory, of resignifying memory in order to envision a richer present and future *in dialogue*, is a technique of communal survival. The wounds of the past will never disappear. The turn to a community's own capacious traditions is its attempt to narrate anew the signification of the resulting scars of past wounds. An institution's history likewise contains within itself an openness to new meanings and directions within its own social memory. Instead of asking solely about the restoration of trust, then, a company might also consider how to enact practices from within its own traditions (and histories) that might demonstrate trustworthiness over time.

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The narratives we live by as humans and institutions impact the kinds of humans and institutions we become. We make the norms that in turn make us. Disruptive events allow for a promulgating of new language and fresh returns to our social inheritance that in turn give rise to new narratives, experiences, identities, and articulations of norms. Religious communities remind us of the significance of our own histories and the possibilities that emerge within them in order to discover new significance and resources for our current times and challenges.

This vibrant understanding of history might prove a useful way for an institution to rethink its traditions as containing their own cleansing techniques within its own history. What, for example, in the grand traditions of the past might work against the present public story and the general public skepticism of large, global corporations? It is a tense moment of possibility. This is not a call for historical revisionism. Rather, it is a chance to redress and perhaps build on the vibrant potential living amidst a company's own traditions and histories.

**[ 9 ]**  
***Honesty about an institution's Ideals is the most profitable strategy.***

Two major constitutive parts of institutional trustworthiness are effectiveness and honesty. In considering how institutional trust may be restored, then, it is wise to reconsider an organization's effectiveness and honesty with respect to its products, systems, and communications as part of the embedded nature of trust. As a way of positioning this particular Thesis, we consider some

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theological reflection found within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam on the importance of considering the nature and being of "God / god." This provides distinctive insight into trust and a deeper understanding of how honesty in what *we confess* and *what we do* is the most profitable strategy.

From the perspective of the Abrahamic traditions, trust, honesty, and effectiveness (or flourishing, we might say) form a kind of triad. These three traditions are, of course, monotheistic traditions. Each possesses idiomatic articulation of that monotheism: the *shema* of Judaism and repeated by Jesus: "Here O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one"; and the *shahada* of Islam: "There is no god but Allah." The social significance of the word "god" manifests itself in the highest organizing principle of a community gathered in that name. "God" is the norm a community metabolizes and synthesizes through reciprocal attitudes operating within a structure of trust. The norms communities create through their recognitive identification with each other thus creates a kind of Spirit. The Spirit of the institution, in this sense, becomes a unity. And the integrity of this unity is a social work. Trust is the mutual enactment of this work within the community in accordance with its confessed norms. The rupture of this fragile bond of trust is a threat to the community itself. As noted above, we make the norms that make us. And when those norms are threatened to be "unmade," the community itself is threatened to be "unmade."

The dissonance between one's stated or confessed "god" and one's lived "god"—that is, the "god" one in practice serves by their actions—is described in the Abrahamic traditions as idolatry. God is a community's highest principle, its organizing

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confession, its Ideal, its norming Norm. The concept of sin within these traditions manifests itself as a falling short, disregard, or ignorance of a community's Ideal. Idolatry is something different. It is a replacement of the *Ideal* with its own imitation—a kind of parody, a lesser god. Throughout religious texts a summons is delivered to the religious communities: "Choose this day whom you will serve." Such summons are a charge for communities to reflect honestly on this tension between their confessed Ideal and their lived ideals. Though resonating throughout the Abrahamic traditions, a particular accent within Islamic thought is that trust in Allah leads to a trustworthiness within the community and one's social spheres. That is, the social cohesion of the community is established by each individual's participation within the service and worship of Allah. By identifying with and sacrificing to the norming Norm of a community (viz., "god"), trust remains in its embedded invisible form.

This theological background is significant when it comes to restoring institutional trust precisely because it confronts the root of the stated desire to be a trustworthy company. Each institution must honestly confront the question: What is our ultimate concern as an institution? What is our chief Ideal? What is the organizing principle and norming Norm of our company? Answer this honestly and you have the "god" of your confession. Now consider the ideals and values of your histories, policies, practices, structures of promotion and reward, etc., and, in so far as there is dissonance, you have your idols. The wisdom of the Abrahamic religious traditions is in their explication of idolatry as self-harm. Double-mindedness is "bad for business" precisely because it is poor self-care. Lapses and losses of trust within a

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company's history provide a moment of strategic significance precisely because of the opportunity they allow to articulate afresh and honestly its confessed Ideal, and then reverse engineer all practices and structures to enact honestly that Ideal. Confessing an Ideal—a god—is easy. As an early Christian text states, "You say God is one [you can recite the *shema*], *good!* Even the demons can, and tremble." That is, the *confessed* Ideal must be the *lived* Ideal. Confession is easy. Living the Ideal requires the long habit of becoming that Ideal.

Closing the gap between a community's—or an institution's—stated Ideal and its lived ideals is guided along by uncompromising honesty at every level. It also requires sacrifice to the long-term benefits of living out the confessed Ideal. Communications must be honest about its products, clear on its whole effects, forthcoming about its past, and bold in its systemic change for a better and more profitable future. An institution's structures of meaning and ultimate concern are in place before an institution's agency. (We make the norms that continually make us!) Care and attentiveness to these structures of meaning are therefore necessary. They must be consistently intervened—not simply after they collapse. After a moral failure, there is a need for an honest articulation of for what an institution is taking responsibility. What is needed is an internal renovation and honest consideration of the lived and practiced ideals of an organization. In short, institutions must destroy their idols and return to their honestly articulated Ideal.

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***Every model of social change must account for institutional and personal fallibility.***

The capacity for errors and mistakes is woven into the moral subject according to the Abrahamic traditions. Resources for repair are thus constitutive of the human experience and religious teachings. The inevitability of our fallibility, and the error-prone nature of all institutions, logically follows. There is thus a vigilance and care called for that is at the heart of these religious traditions' articulation of the self and the community. The manifestation of this care is never one of moral perfectionism. It is rather a call to an attention, a care, and a vigilance in the ambiguities of the self and communal life. Such complexities call for institutional wisdom. The moral subject will never expel its own ambiguity. Whatever new institutional direction is chartered after a moral failing, it will never completely remove this fundamental ambiguity. If an institution wishes to break the repeated cycles of its past misdeeds, it must confront and account for institutional and personal fallibility.

There is an added dimension to this on the side of the offended party. It, too, must practice wisdom and account for its own fallibility even within its just cause. At some point, the wounded must let their wound be. Continued picking at the wound will prolong the scarring and accompanying pain. Though delicate, part of the restoration of trust must account for the fallibility of the wounded party as well. At some point, the offending party must move on while remaining attentive to its own fallibility in whatever new processes it constructs. Considering institutional fallibility is thus a new way of conceiving of institutional responsibility.

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Fallibility does not mean that we as humans and institutions have malevolent intentions. Rather, it means that we possess incomplete knowledge. When does incomplete knowledge become a false reality and lie? This is a call for deep institutional humility. Fallibility forewarns us that the presenting problem will not always be the causal problem. On the one hand, this is a call for an empathetic existence—as written in “The Ethics of the Fathers,” we should judge everyone on the side of merit. On the other hand, this is a call for shrewdness—we must retain a healthy suspicion of all institutions and individuals (ourselves first and foremost!). Forgiveness is an imperfect process of jointly reinterpreting the significance and meaning of past events to promote reconciliation between victim and perpetrator. It is, in the end, a fragile bestowal. This leads to a cycle of imperfect repentance and forgiveness. The need for the repetition of this “imperfect cycle” manifests itself as the trauma of the offense inevitably recurs in both parties. The restoration of trust is never promised. By working collaboratively toward trustworthiness, however, trust may arrive.

[ 11 ]

***The long tail of responsibility.***

Within the texts of Abrahamic traditions there exists a transgenerational principle that “the sons suffer the sins of the father.” Intriguingly, the duration of this transgenerational burden is temporally fixed. The generational range is not consistent and not necessarily the point. What is significant are the manners in which these traditions attempt to instill a culture of learning from past models of living with past errors committed. The wise institution asks itself how it should operate responsibly within

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the effective force of the sins of the fathers. How does it justly steward its histories? And, going forward, how might the current leadership within an institution be the generation that breaks the cycle of past misdeeds? Religious traditions have a different understanding of the vector of time than corporate entities. It is not quarterly returns or even annual results that mark success. In the Abrahamic traditions, everything is viewed in light of eternity. The wisdom of this teaching acknowledges the long tail of responsibility on the one hand, and the promise and necessity of an eventual breaking free from its past, which together lead to a renewed sense of trust.

## **CONCLUSION AND POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD**

Our research and exploration into the wisdom traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam sought to provide fresh insights into the presenting problem of how to restore institutional trust and has yielded high returns. We propose the above Eleven Theses to expand our mindset and frames of reference to help reframe the presenting problem and move toward collaborative ways of rebuilding trust. Other religious traditions, indigenous traditions, and spiritualities offer their own insights that are also worthy of study and reflection. Similarly, the Eleven Theses—whether individually or as a whole—merit further reflection to help concretize and operationalize these wisdom concepts into the modern global company and marketplace. In particular, within the framework of the Eleven Theses, we highlight the Abrahamic conceptions and practices of transparency, conversion, confession, institutional ritual, covenant, care of self and the other, mutuality,

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honesty, and fallibility as particularly worthy of transposition and application into a corporate context and ethos. Similarly, policies and programs should be explored that draw on religious insights into the vector of time and the related practices of preventive, future, and restorative ethics.

To be sure, implementing these Theses and trying to locate them within a wider economy of trust is not without significant challenges. Indeed, not all injured parties wish to have anything to do with the organization that caused them harm, let alone be invited to rebuild trust. Moreover, how to collaborate on determining ends and means is complicated with so many counterparties and stakeholders who themselves are not necessarily in agreement. In such cases, the rhythms of restoration must be conceived to understand and respect such positions and be part of a company's stewarding of the passage of time.

We operate in an extremely competitive global market economy that places high expectations on speed, innovation, increasing corporate profits, return on assets, and return on investment. We also operate as human beings with our own high expectations and eternal yearnings for dignity, respect, and trust. This paper seeks to amend the vector of time and focus from quarterly returns to whole-life returns; to expand and change our mindsets from thinking about the way things are to what they might be; and to integrate the reality of the physical with the wisdom of the metaphysical. Religions, such as the Abrahamic traditions studied here, have spent thousands of years thinking about these very challenges. At their heart is one of the most basic questions of life: trust—and how to rebuild trust after it has been broken.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION, CONSIDERATION,  
DISCUSSION, AND POSSIBLE ACTION**

**In light of the above paper and Eleven Theses, we invite you to consider the following questions for reflection, consideration, discussion, and possible action in the context of your organization or industry sector:**

1. How can your organization responsibly and wisely steward the passage of time (by cultivating practices of transparency, confession, conversion, institutional ritual, loving others as ourselves, covenantal mindset, and others mentioned above) to demonstrate trustworthiness and pave the way for rebuilding trust?
2. How might your own humbling moment lead to a conversion of institutional consciousness? How might this humbling moment lead to genuine transformation within your structures of leadership, product development, and the metrics of success that allowed for the prior actions resulting in a breach of trust to occur in the first place?
3. What wisdom concepts and practices expressed in the Eleven Theses did you find most compelling, creative, or innovative? How might your own organization experiment with, socialize, operationalize, and manifest these practices into effective and sustainable business practices? With which one(s) would you begin?

4. Do you need to accept all Eleven Theses as an integrated and interdependent whole, or can you select certain theses and practices that can work in isolation, independent of the others? And if so, which of these has the most potential impact for your organization?
5. What is your institution's Ideal? And how do you close the gap between that and your lived ideals?
6. How might you move from a contractual mindset to a more trusting, covenantal mindset? What might institutional ritual look like in your organization?
7. If using expressly religious language or concepts from multiple religions is awkward, frowned up, or forbidden in your company culture or some of the places where you conduct business, how might you transpose the wisdom, insights, and practices found in religious resources into accepted commercial language for your context?
8. Would a similar exercise learning from other religious traditions, indigenous traditions, and spiritualities be worthy of study and reflection?
9. Would it be of interest to convene a colloquium or gathering of some sort built around exploring the Eleven Theses in greater depth, considering concrete practices and ways they might manifest themselves in your organization or industry sector?
10. What other salient questions come to mind in light of your own organization's unique story and history with broken trust and attempts to restore or rebuild it?

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