

THE RESTORATION OF TRUST?

Insights and Lessons from
Wisdom Traditions

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A Foreword to

“Towards a Restoration of Trust?

Preliminary Insights and Lessons from Wisdom Traditions”

“We cannot walk out the door without entering into a series of exchanges structured by trust.” Or so we suggested back in January of what globally has turned out to be a rather eventful 2020. The goal of this Foreword is to explore whether or not the 11 Theses articulated in the “Preliminary Insights and Lessons from Wisdom Traditions” remain relevant in considerations of institutional trust. Or, have they aged poorly this side of the varying mishandlings of the COVID-19 pandemic, the social unrest loosed by repeated racial injustices, and the mounting political divisiveness?

It would be tempting to take as given that the world has changed since January. In very real ways, of course, this is true. A worldwide pandemic has claimed over a million lives, threatened the livelihood of many millions more, and exacerbated mental health challenges owing to forced isolation and economic crises. Moreover, the senseless killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers sparked worldwide protests in cities as diverse as Brisbane, Cologne, Dakar, Gothenburg, Istanbul, Lausanne, London, Madrid, Marseille, Milan, Montreal, Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, Seoul, Tokyo, and Warsaw, to name but a few. And far too many politicians seem to fiddle while their cities burn instead of finding real and sustainable solutions.

Clearly, then, a lot has happened since January of 2020. But has anything really changed? Globally, police brutality and the killing of marginalized bodies are hardly new. Those whom we trust to serve and protect our communities have long done so discriminately. And, around the time our pamphlet began circulating, varying governmental bodies privatized knowledge of a mysterious pathogen enveloping the world. The multi-dimensional mess we are in—economically, socially, politically—is in no small measure owing to the obfuscation of governments and institutions attempting to save face and shift blame. Governments entrusted to serve the best interests of their citizens have, of course, in many cases faithfully fulfilled their charge. Others have engaged in elaborate coverups and misinformation in order to protect the power and interests of a select few. Sadly, none of this is new. Such practices have a long and unfortunate history. And very little is new about the base populism and polarization exhibited in contemporary politics. And yet something does feel different—or, at least intensified; namely, suspicion and distrust, especially of institutions, has become a default position. Though life may be lived through a series of exchanges structured by trust, a spiraling trust deficit has been made manifest when it comes to the structures themselves.

This trust deficit was apparent In January of 2020 when we considered the question of the “Restoration of Trust” through the lens of ancient wisdom traditions. It was apparent to us then, that though humans are resilient actors, the fragile bond of society that holds us together was fraying. The reasons for this are complex and many. They tend to gravitate around a suspicion of motives and the opaque reporting procedures of civic institutions, such as governments, multinational corporations, universities, and even religious bodies. The latent inequity and corruption around the world made manifest by recent events thus portends to something sinister. The lived realities of humans operate within systems of the world that are structured by a framework of trust, and yet have been revealed to be untrustworthy. The question of trust and its “restoration,” therefore, are as relevant as ever—and, dare we say, perhaps even more urgent than when we first released our paper at Davos in January of 2020.

All is not lost, however. Worldwide protests have awoken a spirit of accountability and focus on matters of social equity, transparency, and justice. Indeed, many civil servants, corporations and their employees, religious bodies, and other institutions of authority and power have publicly lamented and taken actions against repeated abuses of trust. Though both the marginalized and those with power and vast resources at their disposal may feel suspicious and unsure if collective action will ever make a difference, some are taking bold steps that fill our current moment with a global sense of historical possibility. But how does this relate to our consideration of the restoration of trust?

A critical element raised in our paper in January of 2020 was the dialectical tension between trust as an embedded phenomenon—that is, trust never stands alone—and the inevitability of social relations that operate within a framework of trust. As we already noted, we live in a world where both distrust in and our dependence upon institutions are on the rise. Socially, this is hardly sustainable. What we are witnessing in these outbreaks of worldwide protests is the mounting pressure of this underlying tension. What are corporations and institutions to do?

Unless directly related to their spheres of business, corporations have traditionally been reluctant to take public stances on social issues—deferring public policy matters to governments, NGOs, and other domains of civil society. And for good reason. When CEOs speak on behalf of their company and its stakeholders, publicly advocating for one side of a social issue, for example, opposing sides inevitably responds with boycotts, social media massacres, ad hominem attacks, calls for “cancelation,” or other such forms of punitive responses. Corporate and political responses to social demands more often than not thus pivot toward optics instead of content, hoping to be seen as “saying all the right things” without being specific enough to draw rebuke or controversy—or effect transformational change! Some have simply whiffed, parroting empty platitudes or even unsalutary

actions. Other CEOs and leaders, however, have quietly demonstrated pro-social leadership in these and other areas that are vital not only to their business and their employees, but to society writ large. It is our hope that perhaps in the re-releasing of our paper, coupled with leaders and social groups who take a long view of history, that a return to wisdom traditions might offer fresh resources at a moment dominated by justified suspicion.

Our short answer to the question we have received from a variety of international figures who have both effected and experienced the wounds of breached trust if the 11 Theses remain valid in light of everything that has happened since January 2020, is thus yes. Indeed, the 11 Theses could and perhaps even should be further explored, expanded, and experimented with. To be clear, we do not propose such traditions provide easy answers to current questions as such. They do something far more powerful and relevant: they question our questions. Ancient wisdom traditions remind us, to reprise the great line from W.E.B. DuBois, “to tell the truth about the hideous mistakes, the frightful wrongs, and also the great and beautiful things” that people and institutions can do. As we note in the paper, “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.” (see Thesis 9)

Consider, for example, how wisdom traditions view the vector of time and the long tail of responsibility (see Thesis 11). The passage of time is often measured in terms of seasons, generations, eras, and even eternity; not in short-term quarterly or annual returns. This dimensional view of time is informed by a desire for sustainable flourishing of communities as opposed to short-term gains by individuals. Wisdom traditions also offer those who have breached trust a pathway to wholeness; a way to get right with neighbor, society, and even one’s God (see Thesis 1 and 3). Or, to employ modern examples, to get right with customers, regulators, and a wider community of stakeholders. This often involves developing rituals and practices, and instilling these into a community’s institutional memory and marking of time (see Thesis 7). Companies and other

institutions who can transpose these ancient sacred rituals, customs, and steps into contemporary language and secular practices will find fresh and transformational possibilities toward repairing and rebuilding trust.

Another reminder from wisdom traditions is the importance of being honest about an institution's ideals as the most profitable (in all senses of the term) strategy ([see Thesis 9](#)). Many wisdom traditions talk about the danger of worshipping false gods—or living an illusion. Most corporations and institutions have their walls decorated with posters and plaques containing their highest ideals as formulated in their mission statement and guiding values. But, as we wrote back in January of 2020, “the dissonance between one’s stated or confessed ‘god’ and one’s ‘lived god’”—or the tension between stated ideals and actual ideals that drive practices and behaviors—is corrosive to trust and its repair. “Lost trust,” as we suggested, “cannot be recovered. It must be built anew.” Such repair requires honest self-examination, confession, contrition, and a confrontation of institutional motives ([see Thesis 2](#)). Processes of repair are often preceded by a public humbling and corporate “conversion moment.” If seized, and co-created with those who have been harmed, such moments can become a turning point for an institution’s sustainable and lasting transformation ([see Thesis 3](#)).

Central to the repair of trust is embodying truthfulness, transparency, and sustained behaviors worthy of trust ([see Thesis 1 and 8](#)). To mix modern and ancient metaphors for a moment, how leaders and their institutions who have breached society’s trust use their time in the “penalty box”—often for many years—or how they steward the passage of time, is a notable indicator of authenticity and actual transformation. The restoration of trust travels best along the way of every-day reparative demonstrations of trustworthiness. This involves cultivating practices of care not simply for parties who have been injured, but also cultivating practices of self-care ([see Thesis 4](#)). Both are necessary to restore healing and sustainable trust in a relationship.

Finally, wisdom traditions frame discussions of the restoration of trust through a reckoning with institutional and personal fallibility. Both the offending and offended parties bear responsibilities. And while we should judge each other on the assumption of merit, such traditions remind us of “imperfect repentance and imperfect forgiveness” (see Thesis 10). Such imperfection or fallibility can be assuaged by committing to a sustainable and transformational change that is guided by a move away from a contractual mindset and towards a covenantal mindset (see Thesis 6). Covenantal relationships cultivate trust; contracts imply distrust. Covenantal relationships increase transformative possibilities; contracts constrain and minimize the possible.

Not in spite of, then, but precisely because of all that has transpired since we first released our paper back in January of 2020, we re-offer the 11 Theses here for fresh consideration. Our hope is that they will aid not only in reframing the question of the restoration of trust and practices of repair, but also inspire a more generous and pro-social suspicion. Nothing is worthy of trust in governmental mishandlings of a global pandemic, police killings of marginal bodies, and the base politics of polarization. Wisdom traditions, in fact, call for a reckoning and demand for repair for such institutional malfeasance. They also, as we have attempted to show, invite both offending and offended parties into relational repair. We therefore re-offer the following as way to address and redress the spiraling trust deficit. And, perchance, to incite institutions to initiate practices of repair. Perhaps we might once again be able to walk out our front door and be the beneficiaries of an unseen series of exchanges structured by trust.

David W. Miller and Michael J. Thate



¹ 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 “restoration of trust” in a corporate context, drawing on wisdom literature found in various religious traditions. I engaged my colleague Michael 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 we spoke with. The research methodology and subsequent findings and views represented in this white paper are the authors’ only and were not influenced by nor do they necessarily reflect the views of PMI. Nor do they 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.

We cannot walk out the door without entering into a series of exchanges structured by and reliant on 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 they 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 nonmaterial 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 repairable. Such breakdowns 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 a commercial level, say between a company that hid, downplayed, or denied possible dangers associated with its products and its customers. Talk of trust in both theological and everyday language is an invitation to reflect on a breakdown of trust and the possibility of its repair.

That is what we seek to explore in this paper. Can a company restore trust with its customers, regulators, and other stakeholders—especially if the organization has 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, and other such specialists to try to clean up their reputation and restore trust. Some make restitution, whether legally required or voluntarily. Yet the public remains skeptical, is suspicious of spin and further manipulation, and becomes even more unwilling to trust again. Indeed, a recent *Wall Street Journal* article entitled, “In Corporations We Trust?” cited a Gallup poll referring to a “trust crisis” facing “big business.”

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 on the resources found in the three Abrahamic traditions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). And we asked, "What can we learn from these ancient sources of wisdom that might help contemporary companies heal when they 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 simple 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 doesn't heal all wounds. It does, however, allow them gradually to scar over if the offender and the offended enter into a mutual relationship committed to repair. After making apology and recompense, demonstrating authentic contrition, and making appropriate structural changes ensuring the injury is not repeated, the offending party must still bear responsible stewardship in 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. These sectors include but are not limited to aerospace, automotive, banking, commodities, government, media, and even professional services who purport to serve a common good. Through egregious misdeeds 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 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 restitution, and reassures stakeholders they have 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 traditional best practices? That “something” might be illuminated by religious traditions and their narratives 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 brief, 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 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, then, that religious traditions offer fresh 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 commentaries, hosting an in-person consultation of leading scholars, and conducting interviews with several other experts. We focused 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 Twelve Theses. Like a twelve-story structure, each thesis is related to and builds upon the others, culminating in a cohesive picture. We hope these theses provide fresh thinking, insights, and ideas to help corporations and other institutions move closer to a more holistic and sustainable rebuilding of trust.

TWELVE THESES ON THE RESTORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL TRUST THROUGH THE LENSES OF THE THREE ABRAHAMIC TRADITIONS

[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 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, 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.

Notably, the restoration of trust is an appropriate leading question. However, it is not 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 in various places, “We are full of doubt.” We miss the point if we think such wisdom texts are condemning humans as flawed and corrupt. To the contrary, these traditions also accent that human beings are created in the image of God. Though speaking to our frailty and fragility, these texts and traditions also explore the wild, 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 are counteracted by a vigilant cultivation of practices of transparency. This vigilance consists of an honest self-examination, confession, and confrontation about processes, pressures, and the nature of the product that unwittingly encourage 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 the same direction. And practices of transparency help guard institutions from repeating the defensive instincts and postures of past 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 itself. Even so, going forward, however, 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 transparency enacts and communicates system-wide contrition while also inviting offended parties back into relationship. Such practices will help reestablish trustworthiness.

[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 wisely stewarding 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 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 Twelve 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 misdeeds to occur in the first place? Of the many useful topics that emerged during our research, this was the most radical and celebrated insight across traditions: whatever the institution that has a trust deficit—be it a corporation, a government, a non-governmental organization (NGO), or even a religious institution—a genuine conversion means 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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There is a “Five Rs” model and process of restoration.

The religious traditions we engaged contain suggestive steps and processes for restoration. These models are glossed here as “The Five Rs”: remorse, repentance, responsibility, repair, and restoration. *Remorse* is a sentiment that must be “felt in the bones” within and throughout the institution. More than a sense of embarrassment and shame for having been caught, institutional remorse is a sincere and pained sentiment of having done wrong. It is feeling the wrong as if it had been done to itself, the institution. It is a processing of the misdeeds as if they were perpetrated against their neighbor. *Repentance*, as discussed above, considers all the processes, steps, and commitments that led to the egregious misconduct and commits to redress them. Institutional repentance is not simply comprised of stopping the misdeed but evaluating and changing the entire matrix that made the misdeed possible. *Responsibility* is a mutual, collaborative exchange with the offended parties on what remedy or recompense might look like. In

a litigious society this is often settled by the courts. Yet many religious traditions advocate personal remediation and eschew litigation, knowing that externally forced restitutions or penalties offer only partial redress. It takes something more to restore trust or create the grounds for a new, sustainable relationship. Responsibility conceived through a religious lens consists of a mutual and collaborative exchange on the memory of the wound. Trust is a collaborative work of memory. Concerned about legal liabilities and financial exposure, institutions often prefer to find ways to accept a more manageable and containable form of responsibility in a given situation. This, however, does not abide well over time. For what and to whom am I responsible, and what that responsibility looks like are collaborative, iterative processes between offending and offended parties. *Repair* consists of transforming and altering the institutional practices and processes that caused the offending acts and behaviors. Even if an institution is remorseful, repentant, and responsible, trust is unlikely to be restored if no attempt is made to right prior wrongs. Painful and expensive though this may be, the season of repair is another way to steward the passage of time so as to demonstrate trustworthiness. Moreover, repairing the rupture of trust is not a solo process; it is a collaborative effort. Reparative practices cannot assume the mutual involvement or commitment of offending and offended parties. There is a cadence to practices of repair, where the relationship being repaired must be co-articulated throughout the process. Finally, *restoration* must not be understood as a return to a prior relationship but the formation of a jointly articulated new relationship. In this case, the more sustainable bond is not the restoration of a broken trust, but the emergence of a new trust through the building of a new relationship over time. The institution can build from the ruins of relational history in order to produce an alternative relationship and history. A plurality of voices and narratives and perspectives are necessary at each step within the stewarding of this new, emerging trust.

[5]

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, however, is for the institution to process the shame and trauma loosed by its own misdeeds so that it can be restored to 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 inward to engage and learn from 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 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.

[6]

**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.” That is to say, 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 such as The Five Rs summarized in #4 above 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.

[7]

**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 legalist 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, the 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 radical 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 virtually any organization 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 alone are not sufficient for sustaining trust. Organizations must seek to live, move, and 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.

[8]

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. This may be one of the most insightful and fresh ideas emerging from the wisdom literature found in religious traditions. Trust is all about a certain type of memory. Ritual is the production of memory and appropriate forms of forgetting that enables communities to move forward together 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 commitments to The Five Rs of 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 other institution ritualize practices at the level of institutional processes of memory, forgetting, contrition, making amends, commemoration, and celebration?

[9]

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 re-signifying 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.

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 an institution's 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 tensive moment of possibility. This is not a call for historical revisionism. Rather, it is chance to redress and perhaps build on the vibrant potential living amidst a company's own special traditions and histories.

[10]

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 the honesty of the products, systems, and communications as part of the embedded nature of trust. As a way of positioning this particular Thesis, we consider some theological reflection found within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam on the importance of considering the nature and being of "God / god." This provides fresh insight into trust and 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 tradition has 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, is a unity. The integrity of this unity is a social work. Trust is the mutual enactment of this work within the community in accordance with their 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 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 the scriptures 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 “worshiping” 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 to Thesis 10 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 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. This time in a company’s history is a moment of strategic significance precisely because of the opportunity it allows 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 an uncompromising honesty at every level. It also requires sacrifice to the long-term benefits of living out of the confessed Ideal. Communications must be honest about the products, clear on its whole effects, forthcoming in its past, and bold in its systemic change for a better, 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 that for which an institution is taking responsibility.

And yet it must be noted, in some industry sectors there exists a grand tradition that spans across cultures and histories outside of the frameworks of purpose, health, or safety. Sometimes, there are real social benefits from occasional, responsible excess. The stating and meeting of obligations are givens. 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.

[11]

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

If the rebuilding of trust requires non-recurrence of actions that breached trust in the first place, and, as this Thesis asserts, institutional and personal fallibility is inevitable, is there any hope? The wisdom found in the Abrahamic traditions along these lines requires some underlying theological reflections.

The capacity for error and mistake are 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 the

emergence 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 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 profoundly new way of conceiving of institutional responsibility.

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 forgiveness and imperfect repentance. 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.

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 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 repeated 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. This leads us to consider three modes of the ethics of trust: preventive ethics (developing practices that help minimize the conditions that cause breaches of trust); live ethics (acting on those practices toward the Ideal); and restorative ethics (acknowledging fallibility and addressing it via The Five Rs and other practices noted herein). 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 past misdeeds on the other, which together lead to a renewed sense of trust.

CONCLUSION AND POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

Our research and exploration into the resources found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam sought to provide fresh insights into the presenting problem of how to restore institutional trust and yielded high returns. We propose the above Twelve Theses to expand our mindset and frames of reference to help reframe the presenting problem and move toward collaborative ways of rebuilding trust. Of course, other religious traditions, indigenous traditions, and spiritualities offer their own insights, which are also worthy of study and reflection. Similarly, the Twelve 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 Twelve Theses, we highlight the Abrahamic conceptions and practices of transparency, conversion, confession, institutional ritual, covenant, care of self and the other, mutuality, 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 time.

We operate in an extremely competitive global market economy that places high expectations on speed, innovation, and 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 we studied here, have spent thousands of years thinking about these very things. 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 Twelve 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 misdeeds to occur in the first place?
- 3.** What wisdom concepts and practices expressed in the Twelve 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? Which one(s) would you start with?
- 4.** Do you need to accept all Twelve 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?

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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 Twelve 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?

We invite you to consider how, in your own organizational context and history, the 11 Theses offered in this paper might serve as resources and insights to help you and your organization find fresh ways to think about and repair trust. In addition to the 10 discussion questions posed in the white paper itself, perhaps you and your leadership team might discuss these questions with the 11 Theses in mind:

- 1.** Where do we begin our internal conversations? Which Thesis might serve as the best starting point?
- 2.** How do we engage and secure internal buy-in from our leadership, management, and other employees to walk the long road of transformation and rebuilding trust?
- 3.** How do we measure progress and sustain our efforts when our external stakeholders are resistant to give us another chance?
- 4.** How do we reinforce our commitment to repair trust with those who do not trust us?
- 5.** How might the insights and lessons from wisdom traditions help us establish trust in the first place, in instances where we've not engaged particular publics before?

If you or your organization are the recipient of broken trust by an institution, we invite you to reflect on these questions:

- 1.** Why should I even care whether the institution attempts to repair trust? Why should society care?
- 2.** Do I have any role in the institution's attempt to repair trust? Isn't that all their responsibility? Or is trust covenantal and co-creative?

