

THE GOD WHO TRUSTS

Hanna Reichel

I. WHAT IS TRUST?

Trust is commonly seen as a central category of human life. This claim has a long history of reflection in philosophy, and, more recently, psychoanalysis and sociology. Thinkers as illustrious and diverse as Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant and Niklas Luhmann, Erik Erikson and John Nash have something to contribute on the matter. While definitions vary, trust is typically treated in categories of interpersonal relations as the tension between uncertainty and hope, between past experience and an unknown future. Its common denominator can be seen as »relying on a counterpart in the face of uncertain and risky ends of an action in free or forced abandonment of control.«¹

The importance of trust for human life—on its personal, interpersonal, and societal levels—can hardly be overestimated. Development psychologists argue that »basic trust,« formed in the first months of life, provides the foundation for all future psychosocial development, and is crucial not only for interpersonal relations, but for the sense of identity and the overall apprehension of the world.² Sociologists characterize trust as a complexity-reducing mechanism which is pivotal for the functioning of social systems in a world of risk and uncertainty.³ In theological anthropology, interpersonal trust often provides the paradigm for conceptualizing faith and religiosity.⁴

While these backgrounds may be familiar and canonical to many theologians, new fields of trust research have developed more recently without the same amount of theological attention: To date, as cold a science as economics has become a new ground of lively debates about trust.⁵ Since the formulation

¹ Tanja Gloyna, »Vertrauen,« *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* 11 (Basel: Schwabe, 2001), 986–90, 988, my translation.

² Cf. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).

³ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Vertrauen – ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität* (Stuttgart, Lucius & Lucius, 1968).

⁴ The fiducial character of religious faith has recently been re-iterated, e.g., by Gerd Theissen, »Glauben als unbedingtes Vertrauen: Theologische Aspekte,« in *Vertrauen*, ed. Karlheinz Sonntag (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011).

⁵ See in the present volume the contribution by Jürgen von Hagen, »Risiko und Vertrauen in ökonomischer Perspektive.« For an overview, see Reinhard Bachmann and Akbar Zaheer, eds., *Handbook of Trust Research* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2006); *Handbook of Advances in Trust Research* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2013).

of game theory's famous »prisoner's dilemma,«⁶ trust has been hailed as furthering cooperation, reducing transaction costs and being beneficial for individuals, organizations, and entire economies. Not only as a rational projection of past experiences into the future, but even understood as »willingness to show oneself vulnerable,«⁷ trust has come to be considered by economists as a form of social capital, one correlated with higher levels of economic development.⁸

All these different areas of study imply that trust is as necessary for human life as it is beneficial for its quality. As an indispensable feature of *human life*, trust has thus become essential to theological deliberations.⁹ Considering trust not only as an emotion, but a virtue, it has even been argued that *Gottvertrauen*, trust in God, should be seen as so fundamental that basic trust and all subsequent interpersonal and societal trust must build on it.¹⁰ Theologian Oswald Bayer even claims, »Without trust, there is no human life.«¹¹

However, is trust also a feature of *divine life*—a topic to be treated when talking about *God*? Should theologians not only talk about humans' trust in God, but also about God's trust, thereby postulating trust as a divine attribute?

⁶ The dilemma was originally framed in 1950 by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher in order to provide an empirical test of mathematician John Nash's concept of an equilibrium point, and formalized and named by Albert W. Tucker (see William Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma* [New York: Doubleday, 1992]). For extensive discussion of the development of trust in repeated social interaction, see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁷ Margit Osterloh and Antoinette Weibel, eds., *Investition Vertrauen: Prozesse der Vertrauensentwicklung in Organisationen* (Wiesbaden: Gabler, 2006), 35.

⁸ See, e.g. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press 1996); Paul Zak and Stephen Knack, »Trust and Growth,« *Economic Journal* 111 (2011): 295–321. Recent emergent business practices (AirBnB, Carsharing etc.) have led to the further theoretization of mutually beneficial models of »collaborative consumption,« see e.g. Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers, *What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption* (London: HarperCollins, 2010).

⁹ Up-to-date engagements between theology and other academic fields on the subject of trust as well as inner-theological debates can be found in a recent »trilogy on trust«: Ingolf U. Dalfert and Simon Peng-Keller, eds., *Kommunikation des Vertrauens* (Leipzig: EVA, 2011); *Grundvertrauen: Hermeneutik eines Grenzphänomens* (Leipzig: EVA, 2013); *Gottvertrauen: Die ökumenische Diskussion um die fiducia* (QD 250) (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2012).

¹⁰ Thus proposed prominently by Hans Küng, *Existiert Gott? Antwort auf die Gottesfrage der Neuzeit* (Stuttgart et al.: Dt. Bücherbund, 1978), 490–528; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983). A recent dissertation comprehensively investigates the relation between »basic trust« and »trust in God«: Andrea Lassak, *Grundloses Vertrauen: Eine theologische Studie zum Verhältnis von Grund- und Gottvertrauen*, (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 83) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

¹¹ Oswald Bayer, »Trust,« *Lutheran Quarterly* 29 (2015): 249.

2. WHY NOT ATTRIBUTE TRUST TO GOD? TENSIONS IN THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

2.1 Omnipotence, Omniscience, Relationality

At first sight, the claim that God trusts appears inappropriate, even outrageous. If trust is a necessary virtue in conditions of risk and uncertainty, trust would seem out of place when applied to God, who is traditionally portrayed as omnipotent and omniscient. If no thought nor movement is hidden from God, there are no conditions of uncertainty that would make trust part of God's experience. In the face of what kind of unknowns would the sovereign ruler of the universe have to rely on trust? There seems to be neither a need nor a place for trust within Godself. Attributing trust to God might at best appear to be a problematic anthropomorphism. It is therefore not surprising that academic literature is mostly silent on the question: God's trust is neither a classical topic of theological doctrine nor often reflected upon in popular discussions about faith.

Nevertheless, in order to seek a theological foothold for the concept of God's trust, let me return to the sociological definition: Trust is both necessary and relevant in order to *reduce the overwhelming complexity* of a diverse world with many potential turns of events, interactions, accidents, and developments. The great complexity of human life is limited, however, by our short lifetime and limited experiences. Far exceeding the complexity that human beings face in relation to other human beings, the world, and God, the complexity for God must be immeasurably greater. The creator of heaven and earth and everything in between, who is both eternal and present throughout space and time, must face complexity that is unimaginable to us.

While complexity may be increased for God, the *necessity to reduce such complexity* may not be. Human beings need to reduce complexity because of our limited capacity to deal with it, because we often feel overwhelmed when making decisions without complete knowledge. But for God, who supposedly holds complete knowledge of actual and possible worlds, natural laws as well as events and decisions, the situation is different. Why should such a God feel any necessity to reduce complexity rather than dealing with it out of his all-encompassing knowledge? Furthermore, the human need to reduce complexity specifically has to do with the unknown character of the future. Faced with numerous potential outcomes of any interaction, humans therefore formulate expectations about the future behavior of their counterparts based on past experience. If one were to foreknow future behavior, however, such an extrapolation would seem inefficient. Rather than using expectations as proxy, God could just take into account future actions as he knows they will occur.

However, one may pause at certain doctrinal and pastoral formulations—which often, but not necessarily have an environmentalist tendency—which

talk about God »entrusting« the earth to human stewardship.¹² Even if seen as eternal and as creator *ex nihilo*, at the point where God endows his creation or specific creatures with a certain agency and freedom, a *certain* margin of un-determined potentiality enters the picture as well. Uncertainty is not the only condition for trust. The dominant paradigm is interpersonal on an even more fundamental level: Trust appears to be foundational for relationships. And while much of traditional doctrine talks about God as omniscient and omnipotent, most theological traditions (except, maybe, strictly Deistic conceptions) also see him as involved with his creation in some kind of ongoing relationship.

As an initial hypothesis, I would thus formulate that, when talking about »God's trust,« the central theo-logical tension is situated between God's omnipotent and omniscient powers on the one hand, and his relationality, his loving interaction with his creatures on the other hand: Omniscience, especially if understood to encompass possible and actual futures, seems to preclude a need or even possibility for trust. Similarly, omnipotence, especially if understood as sovereign control over all possible events, seems to preclude a need or even possibility for trust. However, if there is an ongoing relationship between God and his creation, he must allow *some* room for agency in his creatures, which in turn would make trust to *some* degree a necessary part of the interaction between God and the world.

2.2 Trust—A Strength or a Weakness?

In the tension between our understanding of God's power and love, an important question is whether trust is perceived as a strength or a weakness. Is trust a matter of need and necessity or is it a virtue and perfection? If trust is a matter of necessity, if human beings basically have to trust because they have no choice (or if it is a choice, but a very »rational« choice in the face of complexities with which they cannot otherwise deal)—then theological aversion to speaking of a God who trusts becomes quite understandable, because trust then implies a limitation, an inability in God. On the other hand, if one understands trust as a virtue, a perfection of character, a selfless giving-up of control, it seems more reasonable to attribute it to God than to human beings, because trust then implies an enhancement of life and relationships, a higher quality of life.

So, where does the uncertainty (entailed in the very concept of »trust«) come from in the God-human relationship? Is it (1) due to external factors that cannot be controlled by God? Such external factors would indeed imply limits of God's power. If we exclude this possibility, the uncertainty could still be (2) voluntarily introduced by God, who, in freedom and grace, limits himself to make room for his creatures. Many current theologians (some engaged in this present volume) hold that divine self-limitation is not a weakness, but rather,

¹² See, e.g. John Paul II, *General Audience on Wednesday*, December 13, 2000, url: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20001213.html (access: March 3, 2017).

an extraordinary strength. In the words of Gregory Boyd, »it takes far more self-confidence, far more wisdom, far more love and sensitivity to govern that which is personal and free than it does to govern that over which one has absolute control.«¹³ Yet another possibility is that, (3) the uncertainty is indeed necessary, but it is not conditioned by external factors, but by the very nature of God. In his conception of »essential kenosis,« Thomas Oord maintains that God does not *choose* to risk, love, and trust, but rather risks, loves, and trusts as the expression of his very essence.¹⁴ God is who he is. He has no choice of being otherwise.

When talking about a praiseworthy God, whether God's risk, love, and trust are free or forced is crucial for appraising their theological fittingness. Nonetheless, whether they are free or forced *does not* make a difference for the fact whether we are talking about *trust* or not. Instead of asking whether it is necessary or optional for God to trust, it might be helpful to invert the question. What if God were *unable* to trust? What is the greater weakness: the ability to trust or the inability to trust? For human beings, the inability to trust is a serious pathological condition, one that considerably impairs life. Wouldn't a God who is unable to trust be the most dismal, miserable and lonely being of all? Even if trust were *unnecessary* for a sovereign being, wouldn't trust worthy of a divine being be the one that is *freely* given, rather than conditioned by rational calculation or bare necessity? God may even be the only being strong enough to extend trust even if he already knows that this trust will be disappointed.

2.3 »Trust in God« Reconsidered: Can We Trust a God Who Trusts?

Another issue looms large over any prospective doctrine of God's trust: In human life, trust is contingent on the trustworthiness of its counterpart. Trust is a kind of prudence that depends on realistic judgments. In the case of the God-human relationship, the human partner is a problem. Biblical accounts and common sense experience indicate that humankind is often untrustworthy. The crucifixion of Christ is the ultimate indicator of human untrustworthiness. When God entrusted himself to humanity, we not only squandered God's precious gifts, but violated God himself in the very heart of his being, bringing about a very literal death of God. In the sense that trust is well-founded or reasonable, God's trust in humankind wouldn't appear to be justified, or warranted.

Does it diminish God to trust such apparently unreliable creatures as human beings? Is it *irresponsible* of God to trust untrustworthy creatures? As a practical consequence: Can we trust a God who trusts? Or, if such trust were to be attributed to God, shouldn't we rather rebel and resist such a haphazard and precarious reign?

¹³ Gregory Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Dipolar Theism Toward a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 336.

¹⁴ See Thomas J. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015).

In the face of all these tensions and open questions, I will now turn to theological resources to develop a case in support of the notion that God trusts.

3. RESOURCES FOR A DOCTRINE OF GOD'S TRUST

3.1 Theism vs. Trinitarian Faith: Jürgen Moltmann's Crucified God

The tension between our understanding of God's omnipotence and omniscience and our understanding of God's relationality has been discussed long before the present question about whether God does, can, or should *trust*. In the following two subsections, I will briefly consider two challenges to traditional theistic notions which place a greater emphasis on God's relationality: The first intervention is the critique of atheism and Christian theism after Auschwitz, prominently articulated by Jürgen Moltmann; second, Open Theism's critique of philosophical theism from a biblical and free-will perspective, prominently articulated by John Sanders.¹⁵

In his diagnosis of contemporary culture, Moltmann contends that the rise of atheism as a significant cultural force and challenge for Christian faith is related to a deep crisis in Christian faith, which is both a crisis of relevancy and a loss of identity (12-30). Moltmann attributes the interrelated crisis of faith and rise of atheism to an erroneous understanding of God.

He construes the prevalent atheism as »protest atheism,« a reaction to the entire range of human injustice and suffering, pain and loss. In the face of extreme instantiations of suffering like the Holocaust, »the question of God's existence is a petty matter compared with the question of his justice in the world« (206). As a result, many have revolted against the theistic understanding of God as foundation and cause, principle and unmoved mover of this imperfect world. Moltmann claims that they are right in doing so. The failure of protest atheism is that it *misdirected* its revolt by confusing the theistic *concept* of God with *God*.

Moltmann claims that this kind of atheism is just the mirror image of the theistic concept of God but that their metaphysical elaborations on divine unity

¹⁵ See Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (München: Kaiser 1972) [eng.: *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974)]; *Der lebendige Gott und die Fülle des Lebens: Auch ein Beitrag zur gegenwärtigen Atheismusbefragung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014). Bracketed numbers in the following section are references to Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott*, all translations are mine. Another major proponent of this debate is Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977) [eng.: *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983)].

and indivisibility, eternity and immutability are not applicable to Christian faith (199f). The problematic metaphysical understanding of God arose because it so greatly emphasized the oneness of God (*De Deo uno*) that it neglected the trinitarian, relational understanding (*De Deo trino*). By contrast, Moltmann's trinitarian understanding of God permits no »childish projections« of human needs into conceptions of divine omnipotence (201). His trinitarian theology of the cross attempts both the »critique and liberation from philosophical and monotheistic monotheism« (201). In the incarnation that led to the cross, God reveals that he is neither immune to the suffering of his creation nor does he remain at a comfortable distance from it. Rather, he takes this suffering upon himself in a radically self-giving, risk-taking, and kenotic way. God's com-passion is the fact that he enters human suffering and suffers our pain. We are not abandoned or left alone in it—God's com-passionate presence in human suffering becomes a salvific and transformative event.

As Jesus dies on the cross, his suffering goes into the very heart of the trinity: When the Son dies, the Father—as father—also ceases to exist.¹⁶ Nonetheless, in the resurrection, God's live-giving Spirit testifies that suffering and death are not the ultimate reality; they are overcome by the triune God. It is not only God who stands in solidarity with a suffering world, but Christians in turn are called to solidarity with the suffering of God and his creation.¹⁷

For our question, »Does God Trust?,« we can take the insight that God's power is not an abstract omnipotence but rather a kenotic disposition of self-giving solidarity with his creatures from Moltmann's critique of a/theism. In the incarnation and, emphatically, at the cross, this God *entrusts himself* to his creatures and then suffers the consequences of their failure to honor this trust.¹⁸ He makes himself vulnerable unto death, but because his trinitarian abundance prevails over the mortal wound, the betrayal of trust does not have the final word.

¹⁶ Moltmann has been criticized as promoting a kind of patripassianism, which as a modalist view holding that God the Father incarnates in the Son and thus suffers himself at the cross was condemned by the early church. Against such allegations, Moltmann qualified his position as a patricompassianism—asserting that the Father and the Son are distinct trinitarian persons but linked in their relationship in a way that the Father is compassionately affected by the suffering of the Son and thus suffers with him. See Michael Welker, ed., *Diskussion über Jürgen Moltmanns Buch »Der gekreuzigte Gott.«* (München: Kaiser, 1979).

¹⁷ This mutual solidarity has been carried further in liberation theology, esp. in the work of Jon Sobrino. See Jon Sobrino, *Jesucristo Liberador. Lectura histórica-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (Madrid: Trotta 1991) [eng.: *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Burns & Oates, 1993)]; *La Fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas* (San Salvador, El Salvador: Centroamérica Universidad Centro Americana 1999) [eng.: *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001)].

¹⁸ An understanding of the cross as God's risk has been further developed by Niels H. Gregersen. See his contribution in the present volume, »Christ at Risk: A Theology of the Cross.«

3.2 Classical Theism vs. Open Theism: John Sanders' God Who Risks

In what has been called »the most significant controversy about the doctrine of God in evangelical thought«¹⁹ in our time, the so-called »Open Theism« or »Free Will Theism« movement has more recently also criticized traditional views of God's omnipotence and omniscience as too static. It has proposed a doctrine of God as fundamentally and lovingly involved with his creation. It aims to take seriously biblical narratives about God's interaction with his people, while opening up room for human freedom in a libertarian understanding.²⁰

Although it has some roots in process theology, Open theism primarily draws on biblical testimonies of God. It criticizes philosophical speculation on divine being and attributes as failing to take into account the dynamic and passionate, living and relational character of the biblical God, thus resulting in lifeless, abstract and constructed concepts. Additionally, Open Theism claims to be supported by the »older« tradition of theism, including the early church fathers, the Eastern Orthodox Church, Anabaptists, Arminians, Wesleyans, Pentecostals and certain strands of the Reformed tradition²¹.

While conceding that »[m]any theologians have developed a risk-free view of providence from Scripture« (38), John Sanders fills more than 100 pages of his seminal work *The God Who Risks* accumulating biblical evidence to show that God is passionately involved in give-and-take-relationships with his creatures, give-and-take with open outcomes. Mainly characterized by love for his

¹⁹ Roger E. Olson, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 190. Particularly by evangelical scholars, Open Theism has been seen as a heresy, and Sanders himself lost his chair at Huntington University in 2004 as a result of such allegations. For a detailed reconstruction of the »scandalous history« of Open Theism, see Julia Enxing, *Gott im Werden: Die Prozesstheologie Charles Hartshornes* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2013), 241–50.

²⁰ The term »open theism« itself goes back to Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville, TN: Review and Herald Pub. Association, 1980). A more public debate started after Clark Pinnock et al., eds., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994). In German Protestant theology, Open Theism has so far received only sparse attention. One recent dissertation critically considers Open Theism's proposal, see Lisanne Teuchert, *Gottes transformatives Handeln: Eschatologische Perspektivierung der Vorsehungslehre bei Romano Guardini, Christian Link und dem »Open theism«* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017 [forthcoming]). In German-speaking catholic theology, there has been somewhat more discussion of Open Theism, maybe due to a greater affinity to free will, see Denis Schmelter, *Gottes Handeln und die Risikologik der Liebe: Zur rationalen Vertretbarkeit des Glaubens an Bittgebetserhörungen* (Marburg: Tectum, 2012); Johannes Grössl, *Die Freiheit des Menschen als Risiko Gottes: Der Offene Theismus als Konzeption der Vereinbarkeit von menschlicher Freiheit und göttlicher Allwissenheit* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2015); and, more critically, Enxing, *Gott im Werden* (s. note 19), 240–94.

²¹ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 171. Bracketed numbers in the following section are references to this work.

creatures, the biblical God is neither a removed or unmoved mover nor a time-less force; rather, he is a risk-taker. Sanders indicates the openness of God's approach by calling it a »journey« or a »project«, rather than a »plan« or a »meticulous blueprint.« Sanders asserts: »When God created [...] he had a destination in mind and desired to take a journey with us. Both the ultimate goal and the boundaries of the journey are set by the creator, but many of the specifics of the course are set by both God and humans as we travel together in history« (198f). God's project,

involves the creation of significant others who are ontologically distinct from himself and upon whom he showers his caring love in the expectation that they will respond in love. God grants humans genuine freedom to participate in this project, as he does not force them to comply. [...] God modifies his plans in order to accommodate the choices, actions and desires of his creatures.(174)

While rejecting abstract notions of omnipotence as divine control over each and every situation, Sanders advocates for what he calls »omnicompetence«—the divine ability to resourcefully, proficiently and creatively handle and master all situations.²²

God's aim »is to produce people who reflect the trinitarian love in all their relationships: with God, other humans and the entire creation« (174). As essential aspects of the trinitarian life, love and relationality are neither dependent upon creation nor the response of his creatures. Sanders thus maintains that God is not *forced* to enter into such relationships, not even to be true to his own nature. Rather, both the risks entailed by creation and by open relationships with his creatures are taken upon Godself by free and sovereign choice²³.

For our question, »Does God Trust?«, we can learn from Sanders' critique of classical theism that there are ample grounds in scripture as well as within theological tradition for considering God as passionately involved in relationships with his creatures, equipping them with free will in order to make them equal partners on a journey together with him. The God who risks is thus also a God who trusts, who doesn't compel his creatures to turn towards him, but who is waiting for their response, and in turn, responds to their actions and prayers. The disappointment of his trust does not lead to the end of the relationship; instead, in an ever-open future, God is powerful enough to tirelessly open up new and unprecedented ways for mutual trust.

²² Ibid., 174, 182, 191 and passim.

²³ Ibid., 174–5, 187 and passim. In this way, Sanders counters criticisms that he presents an impaired, weak God by holding—similarly to Moltmann—that God's self-limitation is voluntary. However, other proponents of open and relational theologies go even further. Claiming »essential kenosis,« they imply that God is not loving and risk-taking by free choice (and thus would have been able to not limit himself in this way), but rather by necessity—if not due to an external force but due to God's own nature and essence. See succinctly Oord, *Uncontrolling Love*, (s. note 14), 151–86.

3.3 Biblical Insights: Stories of God's Trust

At first sight, scripture does not explicitly use language of God »trusting« human beings. Searching for »trust« in a concordance yields 82 verses, most of which contain either exhortations like »trust in the Lord,«²⁴ acclamations like »In Thee/in the Lord I/we trust,«²⁵ or reproofs like »you did not trust in the Lord.«²⁶ In Job, Eliphaz plainly *denies* that God trusts human beings: »Behold, He puts no trust in His holy ones, And [even] the heavens are not pure in His sight« (Job 15:15). Eliphaz seems to share the concerns about human untrustworthiness. However, in the larger narrative of Job, Eliphaz's argument is rejected. So, we as well may need to move beyond Eliphaz.

Using our initial definition of trust as, »relying on a counterpart in the face of uncertain and risky ends of an action in free or forced abandonment of control,«²⁷ we can find an abundance of stories, where God relies on human counterparts where he has an end in mind but does not bring it about by force. Typically, whenever God trusts people with missions, messages, tasks, and assignments, the story unfolds along unforeseen lines, due to the particular responses and actions of his human counterparts, with God reacting to them in turn.

From the very beginning we find creation ordered in a way that allows for trust (Gen 2–3). By placing the forbidden tree within reach of Adam and Eve, God even deliberately *creates* a potential risk and the necessity of trust. The so-called »fall« can be read as a story of trust and its disappointment. Adam and Eve are entrusted to obey God's command, while He—not preventing their transgression in any way—trusts them to adhere to his command. Even though His trust is disappointed, neither the story nor God's trust end; both enter into new dimensions. Letting the relationship continue, God helps Adam and Eve deal with the consequences of their betrayal. And in the new situation outside the garden, within the world, trust in God as well as in each other becomes all the more pertinent—as well as precarious.

In the call of patriarchs as well as of prophets, these individuals typically point out their unfitness, due to such things as youth, weaknesses, or disabilities. But God seems to make a point of entrusting his history, his message, and his legacy to these people who are unsuitable for this investment and unable to live up to it. For example, Jacob, a patriarch and namesake of God's chosen people, is a liar and deceiver (Gen 25; 27)—not someone we would normally trust. Yet God repeatedly demonstrates that his trust does not rely on previously demonstrated qualities of his counterparts. In spite of their human defects, in relationship with God they become reliable witnesses of his trust.

²⁴ See, e.g., Ps 4:5; Ps 37:3; Ps 115:9; Pro 22:19; Isa 26:4.

²⁵ See, e.g., Ps 25:2; Ps 31,6.14 Ps 55:23; Ps 143:8; 2Ki 18:22; Isa 36:7; Phi 2:24; Heb 2:13.

²⁶ See, e.g., Deu 1:32.

²⁷ Gloyna, »Vertrauen« (s. note 1), 988.

The implementation of the kingdom in Israel is in itself the outcome of frustrated trust: God used to be Israel's king, yet Israel wants a human king. Faced with this disappointment, God does not abandon his people, but rather, accommodates their desire to have human kings (1 Sam 8). And when these kings betray the trust placed into them, God still finds ways to continue his journey with Israel. Even David, who is hailed by tradition as the ideal king, fails God's trust numerous times. David becomes an adulterer and murderer, and he also conducts a census, using its numbers for his power rather than trusting and being thankful for God's blessing (2 Sam 11; 24).

God's trust reaches its summit in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the incarnation, he goes beyond entrusting his law or his message to his people: he entrusts his Son, who is crucified. In any human story, the crucifixion would have ended trust definitively (if one of the many previous betrayals and disappointments had not already done so). When one party to a relationship dies, there are normally no further possibilities of trust. However, Jesus' resurrection opens new possibilities for a God-human relation with mutual trust. Not even death terminates God's trust. The resurrection opens a new future that goes beyond any measure of human rationality and calculation.

4. TOWARDS A DOCTRINE OF GOD'S TRUST

4.1 »Pistis Theou«: God's Trust as God's Faithfulness

The Greek equivalent of »God's trust« is »*pistis Theou*.« This phrase is actually biblical and often translated either as »faith in God« as a genitive of the object, or even, as in Karl Barth's famous commentary on the Letter of the Romans, chapter 28,²⁸ as »God's faithfulness,« as a genitive of the subject. It could also, however, be translated as »God's faith« or »God's trust.«

Such a »*pistis Theou*« can be read, firstly, as a *genitive of the subject*. God's trust is first and foremost based on his trust in himself, his self-confidence, his being true to himself (whether we consider this to be an essential or a voluntary commitment), which coincides with the Latin understanding of *fiducia*. Most importantly, however, this commitment is not abstract, but concrete: God is true to himself insofar as he who first said »Be« holds a future open for the world he created. God is true to himself in committing himself to an ongoing relationship with his creatures and by providing the necessary foundations for such a relationship. God is true to himself in extending his trust despite all adverse experiences, holding open for humankind a future full of opportunities to respond to and prove his trust. God's trust is God's faithfulness.

²⁸ See Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung)* 1919 (GA II.16), ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zürich: TVZ, 1985), 18 and passim.

But »*pistis Theou*« can also be read as a *genitive of the object*, that would mean [our] »trust in God.« Thus we are invited to trust the God who has trusted us. We are invited to be faithful to the God who so faithfully loves the world. Humanity itself is not trustworthy. Human beings cannot earn trustworthiness that would allow us to enter into wholesome and life-giving relationships. Can we trust a God who trusts humankind? Maybe such a concept of God is not salvageable and beyond remedy, but his risk-taking trust in the incarnation demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice himself, to suffer harm for our sake in order to save humankind. In trusting us—despite of the consequences—God saves us. God’s trust establishes a relationship that goes beyond rationality, beyond understanding, and even beyond passion, cross, and death. God shows that his radical faithfulness to his creatures cannot stop him from making ultimate sacrifices to counterbalance any betrayal of trust we may be capable of. Therefore, God’s faithfulness, to himself, to his creation, and to his creatures provides the condition of the possibility of our trust in him. We, in turn, can thus trust God, in spite of adverse experiences. Trust goes beyond rational calculation by carrying hope grounded in experience—hope that God’s trust will prove true, grounded in the trajectory of his faithfulness to his chosen people.

4.2 Outlining God’s Trust

Having established that in the bible and subsequent church tradition as well as recent dogmatic debates God’s trust is a central theme, we can further outline a potential doctrine of God’s trust.

- (1) God’s trust is *warranted*—not by the human trustee, but by God’s own steadfast faithfulness. In the cross and resurrection, he has shown that no power, however great, is able to cause him to waver in his faithfulness to creation, let alone to abandon it.
- (2) God’s trust is *justified*—not in past experiences, but in encouragement of the present and in hope for the future. It is justified in the sense that »some value will emerge from the trust or because it is valuable in and of itself.«²⁹ The values which God’s trust establishes are human freedom and agency, a human-divine relationship that makes humans real partners of the divine, and the possibility of inter-human relationships conditioned by trust.
- (3) God’s trust is *responsive*—in reaction to us. God extends trust and he temporarily takes it away. He may take precautions to limit potentially harmful outcomes of a betrayal of his trust. Trust is variably developed in God’s relationship with human beings. It can be extended and fulfilled, it can also

²⁹ Such is the definition of »justified« according to Carolyn McLeod, »Trust,« *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, url: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/trust> (access: March 3, 2017).

develop, increase and subside; sprout, take root, and grow, according to the process of each individual relationship.

- (4) God's trust is *efficient*—not because of the trustworthiness of the human trustee, but in making the recipient trustworthy. Even in inter-human phenomena, there is evidence that trust and distrust both work as self-efficient, self-fulfilling prophecies. When someone trusts me, regardless of my meriting this trust, this trust unleashes productive potentials to live up to it—much more than mistrust can produce a determination to prove it wrong.
- (5) God's trust can thus be seen as an expression of *divine grace*, undeservedly granted, but in turn transforming those upon whom God bestows it. It lifts the involved parties into a new starting position: God's trust makes his counterpart, by divine decree, trustworthy beings instead of controlled beings—not because of anything they have done, but because God chooses to put his trust in them. Because in Jesus Christ God provides the pledge, bond and security for his trust, human beings are set free to respond in a way that honors this trust—and occasionally, we even do so. As sinful humans, we can never in a strict sense merit God's trust—but due to divine grace, even unmerited trust can be fulfilled.
- (6) God's trust, his radical faithfulness, is a wholesome, life-giving *reduction of complexity* which God graciously grants for the benefit of his creatures. For those to whom he extends his trust, the complexity of life is reduced, as is the complexity of the terrifying unfathomability of God's self. God's faithfulness, his commitment to Be Who He Is, to stay true to what he has revealed himself to be, to remain faithful to his creatures, reduces the divine complexity in a way that makes a relationship to God livable—and makes other atrocities of life bearable.
- (7) God's trust is *covenantal*. As depicting divine faithfulness, God's trust is a much more adequate metaphor for God's character as well as for the divine-human relationship than »love,« which is so often used to characterize both. Love, especially in our times, has connotations of romance, of infatuation, of emotionality, of volatility. Tied to faithfulness, the virtue of trust is much more adequate to honor biblical conceptions of the covenant than love. Understood in terms of trust rather than love, God's covenant relies not on something as fleeting and accidental as personal affection, but on a firm commitment in the face of overwhelming odds and even against better knowledge.
- (8) God's trust is a *wager*. God's trust is not rational according to numerical risks or calculated odds. But in Jesus Christ, God himself changes the odds. Even though it remains a wager, God's trust is not *irresponsible*. By its very

nature and premise, God's trust is waiting for a *response*—and providing time and again the necessary prerequisites to make such a response possible, because those he trusts are unable to do so themselves. God's trust which he extended to the patriarchs and prophets, kings and apostles, continues in the story of the church and even today waits for our responses. Although God's trust continues to be frustrated, God's history of trust with his people shows that his faithfulness is greater than human response. God holds open a future in which there can be—and he himself wagers that there eventually will be—a worthy response to his trust.