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**“Through Sin Nature Has Lost
Its Confidence in God”
– Sin and Trust as Formative Elements
of Martin Luther’s Conception of Society**

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Abstract: This article explores how sin and trust as fundamental notions of Luther’s relational anthropology determine his understanding of social relations unfolding in the hierarchies of the earthly realm. Against scholastic works righteousness, Luther maintains that humans are absolute sinners incapable of justifying themselves through good works and receive faith as a gift of unconditional trust in God. This reformulation of the human relation to God has profound consequences for Luther’s understanding of interpersonal relations. Luther understands the justifying relation to God as a precondition for fruitful and trusting social relations in a world infused by sin. Moreover, Luther patterns his understanding of the hierarchic relations between subjects and their earthly authorities on the trusting relation between God and human beings. However, because of sin individuals need to subject themselves to superiors. In this way, Luther’s understanding of the human being as both righteous and sinful seems to be the reason behind the apparent paradox of hierarchy and equality permeating his conception of society.

Keywords: sin, obedient trust, theological anthropology, sociality, earthly hierarchies

1 Introduction

Whereas modern human beings find themselves defined by interpersonal relations, late medieval existence pivoted around the relation to God as

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creator and sustainer of reality. Martin Luther rethought this relation to God in his doctrine of justification by faith alone, which established notions of sin and trust as central to his relational anthropology centring on an understanding of the human being as *simul iustus et peccator*, righteous and trustworthy in relation to God but sinful in relation to the world. In this article, I employ sin and trust as an analytic perspective for examining how the doctrine of justification influences Luther's conception of society and I argue that Luther's paradoxical anthropology fundamentally shapes his understanding of social relations.

Contemporary relational anthropology conceives of individuals as horizontally determined by their various social relations. By contrast, Luther maintains that the basis for human existence *per se* and for interpersonal relations in the earthly realm is the vertical relation to God. Luther unfolds his anthropology by re-narrating the biblical accounts of this relation, which develops from a trusting and deeply dependent relation of loyal creatures to their creator into a distrustful relationship between God and sinful humanity in the Fall. Luther's reformulation of justification is premised on the assumption that every human being is a self-centered sinner incapable of maintaining proper relations to God and to fellow human beings. In justification, God regenerates a trusting relation to humans which is sustained through faith. According to Luther, this justifying relation to God is a precondition for fruitful and trusting social relations in a world, which remains infused with sin. Moreover, Luther employs the human relation to God as pattern for understanding relations between worldly authorities and their subjects, which are characterised by love and obedient trust.

I begin the article by analysing Luther's relational anthropology as patterned on the double love commandment and defined by a number of binary opposites expressing the paradox of sin and trust, which determine postlapsarian human existence. Because of sin, human beings trust themselves and mistrust God. In faith, however, God breaks down human self-confidence through the Word of the Law and re-establishes his trusting relation to sinful humanity by sending his Word of Grace, namely Christ. Subsequently, I employ Luther's relational anthropology as point of departure for analysing how Luther imagines a restructuring of society following his break with the Roman church as the primary guarantor of societal order. On this basis, I discuss how to comprehend Luther's emphasis on the need for hierarchical social structures in light of the egalitarian impulse inherent in his doctrine of justification.

2 Sin and trust as focal points of Luther's relational anthropology

2.1 Luther's relational anthropology

Luther breaks with the Aristotelian substance metaphysics disseminated by his scholastic contemporaries and understands humans as relational beings who receive their existence outside of themselves in relation to God and neighbour. Behind this relational anthropology lies the double commandment of love, which binds human beings to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind and their neighbours as themselves.¹ In accord with late medieval tradition, Luther understands the Decalogue to unfold this double bind of love explaining the human relation to God based on faith in the first three commandments and interpersonal relations based on love in the last seven commandments.² In the *Lectures on Romans* from 1515–16 and the *Commentary on Galatians* from 1519, Luther claims that this double structure patterns Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans both of which are divided into a section on faith and a section on love or works.³

In 1520, Luther copies this structure in one of his main works, *De libertate christiana*, in which he unfolds a paradoxical theological anthropology. Luther begins with a section on the inner human being, who is freed from works in relation to God and receives the righteousness of Christ in faith, and continues with a section on the outer human being, who contains sin by humiliating themselves for the neighbour in works of love. Luther defines Christian freedom as a freedom *from* works of the law, which is at the same time a freedom *to* enslave oneself for the neighbour. As opposed to sinners, who trust themselves and become captives of compulsive acts trying to earn righteousness or worldly honour, Christians place absolute trust in God and become masters of a spiritual realm even whilst remaining enslaved subjects of coercion in the earthly realm. However, Luther maintains that sin prevails even in the justified Christian, who seeks to contain sin through works of love. In accord, Christians are masters internally in relation to God, while slaves externally in relation to the neighbour.

¹ Mark 12:29–31; Matt 22:37–39.

² Exod 20:1–11; 12–17; Deut 5:7–15; 16–21.

³ *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe* (WA) 56, 3,6–13; WA 2, 597,34–36. In order to facilitate the reading, I employ the English titles of lectures and commentaries, whereas other texts are referred to by their German or Latin titles. English translations are mainly from *Luther's Works* (LW). If necessary, I have provided my own translation.

Luther recapitulates this understanding of individuals as doubled-natured creatures in the paradigmatic statement:

A Christian does not live in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour, or else he is not a Christian, in Christ through faith, in the neighbour through love: Through faith, he ascends above himself into God; through love he descends again below himself into the neighbour, being all the time, however, in God and his love.⁴

Recently, Volker Leppin has argued that Luther inherits his relational anthropology and, specifically, the distinction between the inner and the outer human being from late medieval mysticism, especially the German mystic Johann Tauler.⁵ According to Tauler, the *imago Dei* of fallen humanity is restored when God is born in the soul of the inner human being. In this way, Christian existence not only stems from God but is in God and the Christian is utterly passive when God works in and through him.⁶ Tauler opposes the inner human being to the outer, natural human being, who trusts his own reason and good works. Leppin asserts that rather than referring to different areas of existence, Tauler's distinction between the inner and the outer human being concerns different relational systems.⁷

Leppin argues convincingly for the influence of Tauler's thought on Luther. However, the main influencer on Luther's relational anthropology remains the biblical writings themselves. As outlined, Luther patterns his understanding of the human being as *duplex homo* on the double love commandment's claim that the individual exists *extra se* in God and neighbour. Luther combines this with a

⁴ WA 7, 69,12–16: “Christianum hominem non vivere in seipso, sed in Christo et proximo suo, aut Christianum non esse, in Christo per fidem, in proximo per charitatem: per fidem sursum rapitur supra se in deum, rursum per charitatem labitur infra se in proximum, manens tamen semper in deo et charitate eius.” Cf. WA 7, 38,6–10.

⁵ In his work, Volker Leppin has demonstrated the importance of the influence on Luther from late medieval mysticism as promulgated by especially Tauler and the *Theologia Deutsch*, which Luther understood as a work of Tauler (see e. g. “Luther's Roots in Monastic Mystical Piety,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb et al. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 49–61 [56]). Leppin challenges the dominant tendency in twentieth century Luther research to highlight the so-called Reformation breakthrough and, instead, argues that Luther's Reformation theology emerged in a gradual process, which was heavily influenced by late medieval mysticism known by Luther from his life as an Augustinian monk (see e.g. *Martin Luther, Gestalten des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, ed. Peter Herde [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006], 116; *Transformationen: Studien zu den Wandlungsprozessen in Theologie und Frömmigkeit zwischen Spätmittelalter und Reformation, Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation* 86, [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015], 127).

⁶ Leppin, “Transformationen,” 134.

⁷ “unterschiedliche Bezugssysteme” (Leppin, “Transformationen,” 131).

distinction between faith and works extracted from the Pauline Letters as well as a dichotomy of inner and outer found in for example 2 Cor 4:16: "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day."⁸ This distinction between an inner and an outer human being reoccurs in several of Luther's writings. For instance in the *Lectures on Romans*, in which Luther asserts that a Christian looks foolish and weak "in exteriori homine" while being wise and strong "in interiori homine."⁹ Moreover, Luther employs a number of other binary opposites deriving from the Bible such as old and new, corporeal and spiritual as well as flesh and soul in order to explicate his anthropology.

Apart from this biblical influence, Luther's binary anthropology is fashioned on the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Luther employs the notion of *communicatio idiomatum* to describe how humans participate in the divine attributes of Christ through faith and become doubled-natured creatures themselves.¹⁰ The two-natures doctrine rests on the biblical narrative of Christ's humiliation and glorification in his incarnation, death, and resurrection.¹¹ As the quote from *De libertate christiana* above reveals, Luther understands justification as a process in which sinners participate in this glorification and humiliation by ascending to God and descending to the neighbour through faith.

According to Luther, Christians experience glorification as humiliation in the world. In this way, Luther follows biblical and theological tradition in emphasizing that suffering and contestation define the ideal Christian existence

8 Biblical quotes are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

9 WA 56, 173,27–30; cf. 10,20–21; 173,31–174,2.

10 In the theological tradition prior to Luther, the notion of *communicatio idiomatum*, an exchange of attributes, was used to describe the relation between the two natures of Christ. Luther, however, also employs the notion to explain the relation between Christ and the Christian. Several Luther scholars have argued that *communicatio idiomatum* is a basic pattern determining Luther's Christology and anthropology (see e.g. Johann Anselm Steiger, "Die *communicatio idiomatum* als Achse und Motor der Theologie Luthers. Der 'fröhliche Wechsel' als hermeneutischer Schlüssel zu Abendmahlslehre, Anthropologie, Seelsorge, Naturtheologie, Rhetorik und Humor," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 38 [2009]: 1–28; Oswald Bayer, "Das Wort ward Fleisch. Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation," in *Creator est Creatura. Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation*, eds. Oswald Bayer and Benjamin Gleede [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007], 5–34). Kjeld Ove Nilsson was among the first Luther scholars to examine this central doctrine determining it as "das Herzstück der Theologie Luthers" (*Simul. Das Miteinander von Göttlichem und Menschlichem in Luthers Theologie* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], 228).

11 This narrative is paradigmatically unfolded in the Christ Hymn in Phil 2:5–11, which plays a central role for Luther's Christology as explicated in e.g. *De libertate christiana*.

in the world. In Luther's earlier writings influenced by his life as an Augustinian monk, participation in the humiliation of Christ involves self-annihilation. Thus, in *Eine kurze Erklärung der zehn Gebote* from 1518, Luther states that love of God and neighbour and self-contempt characterises the Christian: "Die liebe Gottes und des nehsten, und sein selbs verachtung."¹² By contrast, Luther's later writings such as *De libertate christiana* describes humiliation more in terms of a positive self-giving manifesting itself in glorification of God and works of love towards the neighbour.¹³

Luther recaptures his relational anthropology in a reoccurring description of the individual as *simul iustus et peccator*. In the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther determines Christians as simultaneously actual sinners and righteous through God's imputation and promise of complete recovery, that is, "peccatores in re, Iusti autem in spe."¹⁴ By partaking in the righteousness of Christ, Christians become righteous in relation to God.¹⁵ In interpersonal relations, though, Christian remains sinners in continuous need of God's mercy and of earthly hierarchies to subdue their destructive self-interest. Christians remain trapped in a paradox of sin and righteousness in their temporal existence as "simul peccatores et non-peccatores."¹⁶

12 WA 1, 255,19; cf. 264,6: "Charitas Dei et proximi usque ad contemptum sui." The latin version emphasises how self-annihilation takes place through love of God and neighbour.

13 Bo Kristian Holm argues that the notion of self-giving becomes central to Luther's theology as of the *Commentary on Galatians* from 1519, in which the life of the Christian is articulated more positively than in the earlier *humilitas*-theology (*Gabe und Geben bei Luther. Das Verhältnis zwischen Reziprocität und reformatorischer Rechtfertigungslehre* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006], 71–74). I have analysed this difference in Luther's perception of humiliation in my dissertation *Soli Deo honor et gloria – A Study of Honour and Glory in the Theology of Martin Luther* from 2016.

14 WA 56, 269,29–30.

15 Effective and forensic aspects of justification co-exist in Luther's writings as humans are simultaneously mere receivers of God's gift of faith and of his imputed righteousness and active in faith as participants of Christ and his attributes humiliating themselves for their neighbours out of a surplus of faith. While German Luther research has stressed the forensic aspects, Finnish Luther research led by Tuomo Mannermaa has underlined the importance of participation in and union with Christ for Luther's theology and asserted the ontological aspects of faith by employing the orthodox notion of *theosis*. Mannermaa argues for a co-existence of forensic and effective aspects in Luther's theology by distinguishing between favour and gift: "The favor (*favor*) of God (i. e., the forgiveness of sins and the removal of God's wrath) and the 'gift' of God (*donum*, God himself, present in the fullness of his essence) are united in the person of Christ" ("Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," in *Union with Christ. The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998], 25–41 [28]).

16 WA 56, 270,10.

In this way, Luther understands sin as a basic *conditio humana*: “We are, however, always doing works of the law, we are always unrighteous, always sinners.”¹⁷ Luther unfolds his understanding of sin in a harsh critique of contemporary scholastic theologians, who maintain that Christians are able to achieve merits and bring down punishment for sin in the afterlife by purchasing letters of indulgences or doing good works. In his discussion with Jacobus Latomus in *Rationis Latomianae confutatio*¹⁸ from 1521, Luther denies the scholastic claim that the soul is purged from sin in baptism and maintains that even baptized Christians remain sinners as long as they live. In *De servo arbitrio*¹⁹ from 1525, a lengthy attack on Erasmus of Rotterdam's book on the freedom of the will published the previous year, Luther counters the Erasmian claim that the human will is free and able to turn itself towards God perfecting human nature with the help of infused grace. Luther asserts that an accentuation of the human ability to overcome sin and please God through works diminishes his grace procured by Christ. Hence, in the *Lectures on Genesis* Luther states: “The more you minimize sin, the more grace will decline in value.”²⁰ According to Luther, works righteousness reveals a sinful lack of trust in God. Thus, in *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen* from 1539, Luther warns against “[...] falsch vertrauen auff werck (das ist Abgoetterey) und nicht auff die gnade Christi, noch auff sein verdienst, sondern selbs durch werck gnug thun.”²¹

In the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther explains how the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is not a question of righteous versus sinner but pertains to cognition. As opposed to blind and self-absorbed sinners, justified human beings acknowledge their sin and surrender to their need for the imputed righteousness of Christ. Thus, Christians are sinners internally, in their own eyes, but are righteous externally, in the eyes of God.²² In the *Lectures on Galatians* from 1531, Luther restates this paradox of postlapsarian existence: “homo Christianus simul iustus et peccator.”²³ According to Luther, this paradox reflects how individuals experience the Word of God as both a condemning Word of the Law humiliating the sinner and a comforting Word of the Gospel, which allows the believer to participate in Christ's righteousness and mediates a

17 WA 56, 252,32–253,1: “Nos autem semper in operibus legis, semper iniusti, semper peccatores.”

18 WA 8, 36–128.

19 WA 18, 551–787.

20 WA 42, 107,12–13: “Quanto enim magis peccatum extenuaveris, tanto quoque gratia magis vilescet.”

21 WA 50, 628,3–5.

22 WA 56, 268,27–30.

23 WA 40 I, 368b,26.

promise of future glory. Humans experience God as both *deus absconditus*; as the righteous creator God inflicting his judgement and causing human suffering, and as *deus revelatus* proclaiming his forgiveness of sin and promising an eschatological end to worldly suffering.

Twentieth century Luther research has struggled to grasp Luther's relational anthropology. Focusing on Luther's break with scholastic substance metaphysics, Wilfried Joest, Gerhard Ebeling, Oswald Bayer, among others, assert that Luther maintains an ontology of relation rather than of substance. In his influential study on Luther's concept of personhood, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, Joest maintains that Luther supports an eccentric rather than a substantial notion of person.²⁴ According to Ebeling, Luther explains this eccentric constitution by distinguishing between the human being *coram deo* and *coram mundo*; between the inner human being in their relation to Christ and the outer human being in their binding relation to the neighbour.²⁵ In accord, Bayer claims that Luther's anthropology emphasises existence as an eccentric existence in which the Christian lives *extra se* in Christ and in the neighbour.²⁶

Theodor Dieter has criticized the notion of relational ontology for focusing on Luther's relational thinking instead of on the ontology of these relations, thus, reducing relation to a mere negation of substantiality.²⁷ Consequently, relational ontology in fact lacks ontology. According to Dieter, this could be overcome by a theological *Kategorienlehre*, which unfolds the difference and the coherence between the human being *coram deo* and *coram hominibus*.²⁸ Such a doctrine of categories, however, seems to override Luther's attempt at understanding the human being in his existential relations rather than in metaphysical categories.²⁹ Moreover, such static categories risk ignoring that relation is employed as a dynamic notion in Luther's theology, which expresses how humans are nothing in themselves but exist only through God and fellow

²⁴ Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 232 ff.

²⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991 [1942]), 433–35.

²⁶ "Luthers Verständnis des Seins Jesu Christi im Glauben," in *Luther und Ontologie. Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*, Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft 31, Veröffentlichungen der Luther-Akademie Ratzeburg, vol. 21, eds. Anja Ghiselli et al. (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1993), 94–113 (108).

²⁷ Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 635–37.

²⁸ Dieter, "Der junge Luther und Aristoteles," 635–37.

²⁹ Thus, in a lecture on Psalm 51 from 1532, Luther states: "Nec Sanctitas est in praedicamento substantiae sed relationis" (WA 40 II, 354,3–4).

human beings. Whereas Dieter suggests a substantiation of the notion of ontology, Notger Slenczka avoids the notion in his description of the external foundation of the human being as an act of self-consciousness in which the believer comes to know himself as another person that is as Christ.³⁰ Although Slenczka seems right in trying to overcome the problematic notion of ontology, the emphasis on an act of self-consciousness risks downplaying the passivity of the believer, which is so crucial to Luther's anthropology. As Joest underlines, this anthropology differs from not only a scholastic perception of person but also from a modern notion of self, which focuses on conscious decisions of a personal will.³¹

As appears from the analysis above, Luther does not replace scholastic substance ontology with a relational ontology but redefines the human being on the basis of biblical anthropology and Chalcedonian Christology which he brings into dialogue with experiences from everyday life. This relational anthropology unfolds human existence in the interplay between righteousness and trust, on the one hand, and sin and mistrust, on the other hand. These relational predicates utterly determine the individual in relation to God and neighbour. In the following paragraph, I outline how Luther explains trust and mistrust as central determinants of these relations by analysing his exposition of the Fall narrative of Gen 3 in the *Lectures on Genesis* from 1535.³²

2.2 Falling from trust into mistrust

In his lecture on the Fall narrative, Luther contrasts the postlapsarian situation of humankind defined by mistrust in God's words and misplaced trust in humans with Adam and Eve's trusting relation to God prior to the Fall. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve incorporated God's glory and image and lived a life of obedient trust in God.³³ They had true knowledge of God, but he provided them with a word beyond their understanding, which should be believed,

³⁰ Notger Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, eds. Robert Kolb et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212–232 (221).

³¹ Joest, "Ontologie der Person bei Luther," 275.

³² Luther lectured on Genesis from 1535 to 1545. Luther's own lecture notes have not been preserved and the Weimar Edition of the text is based on the notes of Georg Rörer and Caspar Cruciger published between 1544 and 1554. However, Luther authorized the edition by writing a preface and a postscript to the first volume of the lectures from 1544.

³³ "Vir est gloria et imago Dei" (WA 42, 51a,8; cf. 35b,8; Gen 1,27; 1 Kor 11,7). Although using the term *vir*, Luther stresses that both Adam and Eve were created in the image of God (cf. e. g. WA 42, 113b,18–20).

namely the commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Hereby, God gave his creatures a directive for worship, for giving thanks and for instructing their children.³⁴ Without the commandment, Adam and Eve would have no opportunity to confess their trust in God and, thus, acknowledge him as God. Luther recapitulates this paradisiac situation as follows:

In this way Adam and Eve, resplendent with innocence and original righteousness, and abounding in peace of mind because of their trust in God, who was so kind, walked about naked while they discoursed on the Word and command of God and praised God, just as should be done on the Sabbath.³⁵

In this way, even prelapsarian humans depended on their trusting relation to God and on the eschatological hope of unity with him in order to exist. Thus, Luther explains how both men and women partook in the glory of the future life.³⁶ Because Adam and Eve resembled the image of God, they knew, believed and loved God and confirmed their trust in him by keeping his commandment.³⁷

Eventually, though, first Eve and then Adam began to question God's words and distrust his commandment. According to Luther, exactly such distrust in God is the epitome of sin and the source of every other sin: "The source of all sin truly is unbelief and doubt and abandonment of the Word."³⁸ Against scholastic speculations on the nature of Eve's sin, Luther maintains that rather than the actual desire to eat the forbidden fruit, her sin consisted in her doubting and discrediting the Word of God as well as her decision to listen to other words. Hence, the Fall narrative does not concern a specific offense against God's law but the loss of trust in God: "[...] for through sin nature has lost its confidence in God."³⁹ In accord, Luther breaks with the scholastic distinction between forgivable sins and mortal sins and states that the sinfulness of an act is not determined by its content but by the intention or affect behind the work, that is, whether the person performing the act trusts God or creatures.

34 WA 42, 116,12–16.

35 LW 1, 144; WA 42, 108,28–31: "Ita Adam et Heua florentes innocentia et Iusticia originali, pleni securitate propter fiduciam in Deum tam benignum, deambularunt nudi, tractantes verbum et mandatum Dei, et benedicentes Deum, sicut in die sabbato decet."

36 "Ne videretur mulier excludi ab omni gloria futurae vitae, comprehendit Moses utrunque sexum" (WA 42, 51b,34–35); LW 1, 68: "In order not to give the impression that He was excluding the woman from all the glory of the future life, Moses includes each of the two sexes."

37 WA 42, 124b,6.

38 LW 1, 149; WA 42, 112, 20–21: "Vere enim fons omnis peccati est incredulitas et dubitatio, cum a verbo disceditur."

39 LW 1, 167; WA 42, 125b,31–32: "[...] natura fiduciam in Deum per peccatum amisit."

As a consequence of the Fall, humans have lost their glory and image of God and are shamefully exiled from their homeland and their creator. According to Luther, “[...] confidence towards God has been lost and the heart is full of distrust, fear, and shame.”⁴⁰ Because of their mistrust in God, sinners become subject to indulgences such as ignorance about God, false sense of security, disobedience, impatience, and anger towards God.⁴¹ Having lost their glory, humans try to steal God's glory by striving to achieve worldly honour or by trying to force God to glorify them through good works.⁴² Hereby, sinners reveal their lack of trust in God and fail to honour Him as God. In the *Weinachtspostille* from 1522, Luther recapitulates this conception of sin: “[...] die sund, das man got nit ehret, das ist, das man yhm nit glewbt, trawet, furcht sich, yhm nit ehr gibt, yhn nit lessit walden und eyn gott seyn” (WA 10 I/1., 24,5–6).

Moreover, Luther asserts that humans lose their original righteousness in the Fall. Luther breaks with the scholastic claim that righteousness is a gift of God independent of human nature and that fallen humans are able to retain their natural qualities such as faith, love and fear of God even though they lose their righteousness. Instead, Luther maintains righteousness as an integral part of human nature and, consequently, every natural quality is damaged by sin with the loss of righteousness. Or else, so Luther states, there would be no need for Christ.⁴³ Reason is one of these natural qualities fundamentally damaged by sin. Although very useful in worldly matters as it enables humans to tend cattle, build houses, or sow a field, reason has devastating consequences in matters concerning the human relation to God as it incites individuals to trust themselves rather than God.

In this way, Luther argues that prelapsarian existence relied on a relation to God characterised by obedient trust. As I argue below, this notion is central to Luther's understanding of obedience in the relations between superiors and subjects in the earthly hierarchies, which mirror the exemplary relation between

⁴⁰ LW 1, 167; WA 42, 125b,28–29: “[...] fiducia erga Deum amissa est, et cor plenum est diffidentia, metu, pudore.” Cf. WA 42, 35b,13–14.

⁴¹ WA 42, 124b, 41–125b,1.

⁴² Luther's conception of sin as a way for humans to steal God's honour might reveal an Anselmian influence on Luther's theology. Unfolding his famous theory of atonement in *Cur Deus homo?* (1098), Anselm states that when God gives existence to creatures he obliges them to give him honour in return. By refusing to honour God, sinners defraud God of his honour.

⁴³ WA 42, 124b,35–37: “An non igitur frustra est mittere redemptorem Christum, cum iusticia originalis, tanquam aliena res a natura nostra, ablata est et integra naturalia manent?”; LW 1, 166: “Then there was no purpose in sending Christ, the Redeemer, if the original righteousness, like something foreign to our nature, has been taken away and the natural endowments remain perfect.”

God and human beings in the Garden of Eden. After the Fall, though, faith is necessary in order to establish such trusting relations.

2.3 Faith as obedient trust

Whereas Luther explains sin as mistrust in God's Word, he continuously expounds faith as trust employing the Latin term *fiducia* and the German terms *Zuversicht* and *Vertrauen*.⁴⁴ Luther famously expresses this understanding of faith in his exposition of the first commandment in *Der große Katechismus* from 1529. Rather than explaining in metaphysical terms *what* a god is, Luther unfolds *who* God is in his relation to human beings asking: What does it mean to have a God?: "Ein Gott heisset das, dazu man sich versehen sol alles guten und zuflucht haben ynn allen noeten. Also das ein Gott haben nichts anders ist denn yhm von hertzen trawen und gleuben."⁴⁵

Insights into the conceptual historical developments of trust are able to shed light on this theological understanding of faith as trust. Overall, the concept of trust has two main areas of meaning summarized in the notions of fidelity and hope.⁴⁶ First, trusting someone entails certainty and fidelity based on previous experience with the trusted person. Individuals trust someone either deliberately or spontaneously because they perceive of them as trustworthy. As such, having faith in God means trusting that he is reliable and accountable with regard to fulfilling his promises. Behind Luther's perception of faith as trust lies the covenantal understanding of the human relation to God in the Bible. For the Israelites, trusting in God meant trusting his ability to deliver his promise of a fruitful earthly life with numerous descendants given to Abraham in Gen 12:2–3 and fulfilled in Gen 21 when Sara gives birth to Isak. In The New Testament, the covenant between God and the Israelites is expanded to include all of humanity. Moreover, the covenantal promise no longer holds out prospects of a fertile life in this world but is a promise of participation in the glory of future life in the eschaton. As mentioned, Luther claims that even Adam and Eve relied upon this promise in their paradisiacal life.

Luther continuously stresses how faith means trusting God's promises and, thus, acknowledging him as truthful and righteous. Hence, in *De libertate christiana*, Luther states:

⁴⁴ According to Reiner Strunk, Luther employs the notions *fides* und *fiducia* synonymously ("Vertrauen," in *Theologische Realencyclopädie*, [consulted online on September 25, 2018]).

⁴⁵ WA 30 I, 132,1–3; cf. WA 6, 209,24–25.

⁴⁶ Gräß-Schmidt, Elisabeth, "Trust," in *Religion Past and Present* (consulted online on September 25, 2018).

So when the soul firmly trusts God's promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted.⁴⁷

According to Luther, God returns this trust:

When, however, God sees that we consider him truthful and by the faith of our heart pay him the great honor which is due him, he does us that great honor of considering us truthful and righteous for the sake of our faith.⁴⁸

The statement relies on the claim in Gen 15:6 that Abraham's faith in God's divine promise of descendants is reckoned to him as righteousness. God deduces from faith that the believer is righteous and truthful and, thus, worthy of God's trust. In this way, Luther depicts the faithful relation between the believer and God as a relation of mutual trust in each other's truthfulness and righteousness. As sinners, however, human beings are by no means trustworthy. Therefore, humans are only able to enter into a proper covenantal relation to God by participating in Christ's righteousness.

Second, conceptual history reveals how trust signals faith and hope directed towards the future. Trusting someone is an act of courage, which involves risk and demands boldness and carefreeness. As such, trusting God entails a Kierkegaardian leap of faith in which the believer surrenders himself to God's promise of eternal life.⁴⁹ This dimension is evident in Heb 11:1: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Moreover, it is Job's trust in God's righteousness despite of his experience of sickness, loss, and despair as well as Abrahams's trust in God's promise of descendants amidst the commandment to sacrifice his only son, who is the realisation of this promise.

⁴⁷ LW 31, 350; WA 7, 54,1–4: "Sic anima, dum firmiter credit promittenti deo, veracem et iustum eum habet, qua opinione nihil potest deo praestantius tribuere: hic summus cultus dei est, dedisse ei veritatem, iustitiam et quicquid tribui debet ei, cui creditur."

⁴⁸ LW 31, 351; WA 7, 54,21–23: "Ubi autem deus videt, veritatem sibi tribui et fide cordis nostri se honorari tanto honore, quo ipse dignus est, Rursus et ipse nos honorat, tribuens et nobis veritatem et iustitiam propter hanc fidem."

⁴⁹ In the last decades, trust has come to play a central role in social scientific research on interpersonal relations and both psychological and sociological research performed by for instance Niklas Luhmann and Anthony Giddens have emphasized trust as one of the most important pillars of society necessary for establishing social cohesion. For a summary of sociological research on trust see Barbara A. Misztal, *Trust in modern societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998). Interestingly, Georg Simmel, one of the founding fathers of sociology, points to the element of faith in trust in his *Soziologie* from 1908.

In line with Pauline tradition, Luther refers to Abraham as the *exemplum fidei* par excellence throughout his works and accentuates Abraham's trust in God's promise of descendants as the exemplary way for humans to interact with God "through faith, without works of the law" (Rom 3:28).⁵⁰ In his interpretation of Gen 22 in the *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther re-narrates how God tests Abraham's trust in two ways; First, through Sarah's infertility and second, through his command concerning the sacrifice of Isak. God seemingly contradicts his own promise of descendants, and according to Luther, Abraham is only able to maintain his trust herein because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead.⁵¹ Luther emphasises how God's trial leaves Abraham in great despair. He is only able to maintain his trust in God by clinging to the external Word, Christ, who reconciles the contradiction between God's promise of descendants and his command to kill Isaac by revealing that "what is dead lives, and what is living dies."⁵² Luther states Abraham's counter-intuitive faith in the trustworthiness of God as an example for contemporary believers who are to make a leap of faith and rely on God's promise of future salvation and eternal life despite their presents sufferings, which question God's credibility.⁵³

In this way, Luther understands faith as a gift of trust in God, which enables humans to honour God and humiliate themselves for their neighbour. Faith is: "Selbsttäter und Werkmeister, der Gott ehret und die Werke tut."⁵⁴ This vote of confidence is the only satisfactory work available to human beings in relation to God. It expresses itself in praise and glorification of God and in spontaneous works of love, but is at the same time a renunciation of any human ability to act; a confession of self-sacrificial passivity and, hence, a mimetic expression of Christ's obedient trust in Luke 22:42: "Yet, not my will but yours be done."

2.4 The paradox of selfish sin and obedient trust

As appears, notions of sin and trust determine Luther's understanding of the human being in relation to God and neighbour. Postlapsarian humans have

⁵⁰ Cf. Johann Anselm Steiger, "Zu Gott gegen Gott. Oder: Die Kunst, gegen Gott zu glauben. Isaaks Opferung (Gen 22) bei Luther, im Luthertum der Barokzeit, in der Epoche der Aufklärung und im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Isaaks Opferung (Gen 22) in den Konfessionen und Medien der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Johann Anselm Steiger and Ulrich Heinen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 189.

⁵¹ WA 43, 202,17–18; 204,23–25.

⁵² "[...] quod mortuus vivit, et vivens moritur" (WA 43, 216,32–36 [36]).

⁵³ Luther began his lecture on Gen 22 on the 27th of October 1539 at a time when Wittenberg witnessed a plague epidemic and the fear of death must have been urgent for the listeners (WA 43, 200,24).

⁵⁴ WA 7, 26,26–27 (*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*).

abandoned their obedient trust in God and believe in their own abilities to maintain proper relations to God and to fellow humans. In justification, God re-establishes a trusting relation to human beings by giving his Word of promise through Christ, which humans receive passively in faith as God's gift of trust. On this basis, human beings are empowered to return to their social reality and become part of trusting social relations fulfilling the commandment of neighbourly love by reenacting the self-sacrifice of Christ for other humans out of a surplus of faith. At the same time, though, justified human beings remain sinners in the temporal world. Hence, Christian existence is caught in a paradox of selfish sin and selfless trust as the life of obedient trust in God is continuously challenged by egoism. The remaining question is, then, what consequences this paradoxical anthropology of sin and trust has for Luther's conception of society.

3 Sin and trust in Luther's conception of society

3.1 Reorganizing society on biblical grounds

In his early theology, Luther unfolds an extensive critique of ecclesial authorities, which entails a denunciation of the previous social structures as they were secured by the church and maintained through Canon Law. Luther famously burns this law in 1520 along with the Papal bull, *Exsurge Domini*, threatening to excommunicate him. In January of 1521, Luther is excommunicated from the Roman church and begins facing the challenge of rethinking the social structures of new, evangelical societies. The pressing need for Luther to reestablish social order increases with the growth of the Reformation into the 1520's. In light of tumultuous events in Wittenberg caused by the reforms implemented by Andreas Karlstadt during Luther's exile at Wartburg from 1521–22 and the Peasants' War in 1524–25, among other things, Luther realizes how his understanding of Christian freedom over and against church authorities and his emphasis on the equality of every human being *coram Deo* could sanction a political rebellion against social inequality and lead to a deconstruction of social order.

Upon breaking with the authority of the church as the guarantor of social order, Luther turns to the Bible to find norms for reorganizing society. More specifically, Luther expounds the Decalogue as a fundamental norm for proper relations to God and fellow humans as it reveals God's will. Luther expounds the Decalogue repeatedly throughout his career. As will appear, an analysis of these expositions and, more specifically, of his interpretation of the fourth commandment reveals how Luther understands social relations as grounded in as well as

mirroring the trusting relation to God. Moreover, the analysis uncovers how his paradoxical anthropology causes Luther to promote social relations based on obedient trust and obligations of mutual love, on the one hand, while countering distrustful social relations, on the other hand. I focus my analysis on *Sermon von den guten Werken* from 1520 and *Der große Katechismus* from 1529 both of which attest to the need for reestablishing stabile social structures and consult the Decalogue and especially the fourth commandment for guidance.⁵⁵

3.2 Stable social relations emerge from the trusting relation to god

In *Von den guten Werken*, Luther states that the first commandment concerning the proper worship of God is the source of all other commandments all of which are fulfilled through faith alone.⁵⁶ As mentioned above, Luther interprets the Decalogue as an elaboration of the double commandment of love. In stressing the first commandment as the source of all other commandments, Luther expounds the biblical statement that human beings are only able to love and trust their fellow humans because they have been loved and trusted by God.⁵⁷ In this way, the ethics of the earthly realm expounded in the seven commandments of the second table are closely connected to the worship of God as devised in the three commandments of the first table and the faithful relation to God is a precondition for both understanding and fulfilling all ten commandments.

According to Luther, the fourth commandment concerns the trusting relation between not only parents and children but between any kind of earthly authorities and their subjects.⁵⁸ Interpreting the commandment, Luther enumerates a number of general norms for a stable social order, which is based on hierarchical relations between parents and children, the prince and his subjects,

55 Whereas the former focuses on explaining the proper understanding of works as part of Luther's Reformation theology in 1520, the Catechism appears more pragmatic in emphasising the need for obedience towards secular authority. The immediate cause for the publication of both *Der kleine Katechismus* and *Der große Katechismus* was Luther's participation in a number of visitations in Saxony which had left him with a discouraging impression of the general knowledge of Christianity not only among the laity but also among its ministers.

56 WA 6, 209,35–36.

57 Cf. 1 Joh 4:19.

58 WA 30 I, 147,17–21.

a master or mistress of a household and their servants, a husband and his wife, as well as ecclesial authorities and the laity.⁵⁹

Luther underlines the parallel nature of the first and the fourth commandments by juxtaposing the call for obedience towards parents with the commandment to obey God.⁶⁰ According to Luther, both commandments require individuals to honour their superiors, then God and then God's earthly masks, namely paternal, ecclesiastical, and secular authorities. Luther understands superiors as divine co-operators who sustain God's created order and act as God's representatives on earth. As such, superiors should be honoured and shown obedient trust. This distribution of honour and trust upholds the social hierarchies instituted by God.

3.3 A trusting obligation of care and obedience

According to Luther, the fourth commandment reveals how God has structured society in a number of hierarchies characterized by relations of honour, which mutually bind superiors and subjects together in relations of trust mirroring the relation of the justified human being to God. In *Von den guten Werken*, Luther unfolds these trusting relations subjects and superiors and claims that they entail a dual obligation of care and obedience. Subjects are obliged to obey their superiors and superiors are obliged to care for their subjects in a loving manner and do everything in order to be of use and help to them.⁶¹ This emphasis on love is echoed in *Der große Katechismus*, in which Luther states that the fourth commandment concerns the honouring of four kinds of fathers; the actual, biological father, the father of the house, the father of the country, and fathers of the church.⁶² Luther refers to the Roman titles of *patres* and *matres familias* and *patres patriae* in order to prove his claim that all kind of authority has a fatherly office and are under a special

⁵⁹ In his later works, most importantly *Vom Abendmahl Christ. Bekenntnis* from 1528 and *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther specifies his understanding of earthly hierarchies claiming that God has ordered the world in three estates in or directly following creation; the church (*ecclesia*), the household (*oconomia*), and the state (*politia*). Distinguishing between three created orders was common in the medieval theological tradition in for instance catechetical literature. Furthermore, the separation between three estates mirrors the medieval distinction between *ethica monastica*, *ethica politica* and *ethica oeconomica* (cf. Risto Saarinen, "Ethics in Luther's Theology: The Three Orders," in *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, eds. Risto Saarinen and Jill Krayer, [Dordrecht: Springer, 2005], 195–215 [196–98]).

⁶⁰ WA 30 I, 149,11–14.

⁶¹ WA 6, 264,16–20.

⁶² WA 30 I, 155,3–4.

obligation to act out of their fatherly hearts and care for their subjects. Likewise, Christians are to honour authorities as fathers and this honour encompasses love.⁶³ According to Luther, God does not want himself or parents to be honoured with a loveless fear of punishment, which leads to hatred. Instead, they should be honoured with a fear mixed with love and trust, which annihilates any fear of punishment and is instead a fear of disappointing the parents.⁶⁴

Luther emphasises how subjects honour their superiors by obeying and serving them and maintains disobedience as the greatest of sins. At the same time, though, Luther underlines that honour has nothing to do with blind obedience and maintains that Christians should not honour their superiors because they fear punishment or hope for reward. As opposed to blind obedience, honour originates in a God-given commandment and is given with pleasure and joy, that is on the basis of trust and love.⁶⁵ In this way, interpersonal relationships of the earthly hierarchies mirror the trusting relation between human beings and God established in justification. Neither God nor superiors wish to be obeyed because of a loveless fear of punishment or a hope of reward. Instead, obedience is a sign of trust given in acknowledgement of God's truthfulness, which superiors partake in because of their divinely instituted offices.

3.4 Sin and the common human need for subordination

As appears, the trusting relation of the justified human being to God in faith forms the basis for Luther's conception of social relations in the earthly hierarchies. Through faith, Christians are able to enter into a trusting relation to both God and to his earthly masks. Because of his strong notion of sin, however, Luther simultaneously emphasizes the need for every human being to be subordinated into earthly hierarchies in order to contain their sin. Thus, Luther states that the purpose of the fourth commandment is to facilitate the necessary subordination of human beings: "Dan es musz ein iglicher regiret unnd unterthan werden andern menschen."⁶⁶ Accordingly, Luther determines it as the duty of parents to break down a child's will and to teach them to be humble in order that they be able to act against their own depraved nature.⁶⁷ Thus, even though all humans are equal before God, interhuman relationships are

⁶³ WA 30 I, 152,28–35.

⁶⁴ WA 6, 251, 7,14–15.

⁶⁵ WA 30 I, 153,3–4.

⁶⁶ WA 6, 252,1–2.

⁶⁷ WA 6, 255,6–8.

characterized by necessary inequality: “Sonst sind wir zwar fur Gottes augen alle gleich, aber unter uns kan es on solche ungleichheit und ordenliche unterscheid nicht sein.”⁶⁸

In his influential writing *Von weltlicher Oberkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei* from 1523, which concerns the role of earthly authority, Luther treats the problem of sin versus the need for trust in the earthly hierarchies. In the third part of the writing, Luther instructs the Christian prince on how to rule and admonishes the prince to limit his trust in his advisors: “Befelhen unnd wagen solltu, vertrauen unnd dich drauff verlassen solltu nicht on alleyn auff Gott.”⁶⁹ Ultimately, the prince should only trust God in whose place he rules. Prior to this admonition, though, Luther asks a question, which seemingly contradicts this admonition as it emphasizes the need for trust in relations between superiors and subjects: “Soll mann denn niemandt vertrauen, wie will man landt unnd leutt regiern?”⁷⁰ The two statements recapitulates Luther's complex understanding of the hierarchic relations structuring society. On the one hand, princes are to place absolute trust in God and only show conditional trust towards humans because of their sinful nature. On the other hand, Luther acknowledges trust as central to hierarchic social relations by asking how authorities are to govern, if they fail to trust their subjects.

3.5 The paradox of hierarchy and equality

As appears, Luther maintains that because of sin, inequality is necessary in the earthly hierarchies in order to sustain social order. The relations between authorities and their subjects mirror the hierarchical relationship between God and the human being. God sustains his creation through the earthly hierarchies, which suppress sin and enable the fruitful cultivation of God's created gifts. As representatives of God, authorities have a right to honour as they act out God's created order. At the same time, though, Luther emphasises how superiors are equal to their subjects as radically subordinate sinners in relation to God. As outlined above, Luther's anthropology rests on the assumption that all human beings are absolute sinners, who are equally incapable of securing salvation for themselves and who become equally righteous through faith and members of a common priesthood of all believers. On this basis, Luther maintains that authorities are to show mercy towards their subjects keeping in mind their own need

68 WA 30 I, 148,3–4.

69 WA 11, 275,25–26; cf. WA 11, 275,12.

70 WA 11, 275,24–25.

for God's mercy. Moreover, Luther maintains that obedience towards any kind of authority is secondary to the obedience towards God and should be broken if opposing the first three commandments.⁷¹ Thus, although admonished to submit to the earthly hierarchies, Christians are authorised to break with them in consideration of the primary relation to God.

In this way, Luther understands the radical subordination under God as a common human condition that evens out all interpersonal differences and this radical equality of all human beings *coram deo* seems to take precedence over the inequality that sustains the necessary order of earthly hierarchies. This is supported by Luther's continuous statement that true Christian identity is that of the humble servant and by his interpretation of the commandment to honour parents as an expression of the first commandment to honour God both of which should be fulfilled not through blind and fearful obedience but through obedient faith, which is a gift of trust.

4 Concluding remarks

In this article, I have employed sin and trust as a perspective for analysing how Luther's relational anthropology centring on the understanding of the human being as simultaneously righteous and a sinner profoundly influences his rethinking of social order in the years surrounding his break with the Roman church. Against scholastic works righteousness, Luther maintains that postlapsarian human beings are absolute sinners who are incapable of justifying themselves through good works and receive faith as a gift of unconditional trust in God.

This reformulation of the human relation to God has profound consequences for Luther's understanding of social relations playing out in the hierarchies of the earthly realm. Luther understands the justifying relation to God as a precondition for fruitful and trusting social relations in a world infused by sin. Through the process of justification, Christians are able to reenter into a trusting relation to God and to the world by proxy as they receive their existence outside of themselves in Christ. Hereby, Christians are able to enter form trusting relations to their superiors, who act as God's representatives on earth, and fulfil the commandment to honour superiors through faith. Moreover, Luther patterns his understanding of the hierarchic relations between subjects and their earthly authorities such as the prince, the father or mother of the house, and the clergy

⁷¹ WA 6, 253,2ff; 258,11 ff.

on the trusting relation between God and human beings. Luther refuses punishment and reward as useful methods for creating a sustainable society and argues that societal order and welfare depend on the existence of stable relations of trust, which mutually oblige subjects and superiors to love one another through acts of obedience and care, respectively. However, because sin absolutely determines human nature, Luther stresses the need for individuals to subject themselves to superiors and accept worldly suffering.

In this way, Luther's understanding of the human being as both righteous and sinful seems to be the reason behind the apparent paradox of hierarchy and equality permeating Luther's understanding of social relations. On the one hand, Luther's relational anthropology rests on the claim that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God and this claim has revolutionizing effects on the understanding of especially church authority. On the other hand, Luther maintains the necessity of unequal social relations as a means of sustaining God's created order in a fallen world.