

Faith &
the Ties
That Bind

(NOT IN)
Heaven

Stephen Blackmer '74 took a deep breath. Paused.

"I'm going to speculate here. I'm going to go beyond the realm of what I can prove," he said.

The anthropologist turned ecologist turned radical Episcopal minister had just argued that trust was foundational to human society. But, stepping back—way back—he saw it as even more fundamental than that.

"Over 14 billion years of growing complexity of structure in the universe, from the primordial blast of energy to the formation of molecules, stars, galaxies. This increasing complexity of structure, I think, is in some ways connected to the trust required to form bonds."

The bonds he means are not social-emotional, the kinds we form with family, friends, lovers. He was referring to atomic, nuclear, and chemical bonds—the building blocks of all life and all ecosystems.

In his theory, trust is the essential ingredient to everything. The evolutionary trajectory has always led us towards trust—from the first molecular bond to present-day global financial markets—and is leading us ever onward toward ever more complex systems of relationship.

Trust in God is down—the breakdown of trust in religious institutions is not news. Have we simply placed that trust elsewhere? In science? In the cult of self? In popular culture? Perhaps, says Blackmer, though he believes it's more the latter than the former—science had its fifteen minutes, he said. But this is not sophisticated enough thinking. God—by any name—is only a piece of the puzzle.

"I think we're entering a time when a lot of things are shifting, and institutions that were very effective in getting us—for better and for worse—to where we are now, aren't necessarily well-equipped to get us to where we're heading," said Blackmer. "And we don't quite know where it is we're heading."

We are at a crossroads. Our personal and cultural sense of trust is unattached. It is not focused. But is Blackmer's evolutionary trust, the trust we cannot see, control, contain, or understand, operating, as always, at peak efficiency?

"Things have to fall apart before they can be made again," he said. "As long as the system is very stable, there's no room for something new. For new things to grow, old things have to allow new light in."



STORY BY DARRY MADDEN

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"There is so much about trust and responsibility in Jewish life and tradition," said Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow '84. "The Torah is full of language around 'trust in God,' and 'fulfill these responsibilities.'"

And yet, Paasche-Orlow observed, a deeper continuity of trust was broken with the Holocaust.

"I worked with elders for a very long time—people who had faith in an individual God, but no longer did after the Holocaust. Jewish theology has been rebuilding trust ever since then," she said.

Some of the work to rebuild that trust has found a beautiful landing place, according to Paasche-Orlow, in this assertion: there is a spark of God in every human being. God is not "heteronomous;" that is, external, a force, greater than ourselves, which, in its separateness, created or abided unspeakable betrayal.

Jewish practice in America is trying to find a more mystical understanding of God, one that is intrinsic versus extrinsic, as a response to this lack of control in the world at this earlier time, said Paasche.

"There is a deep level of trust to say that I will work my hardest and the world will get a little better. We know that that's not always the case, that horrible things happen both to individuals and to whole peoples," she said. "But that is where is where the deeper level of faith comes in. And that's the closest we have to the right answer."

But here's how it circles back, almost perfectly, to those ancient ideas about trust and responsibility: God is no longer in heaven. God is what we build here on earth, as she sees it. "The message from God is, *this is on us.*" ■

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S A R A P A A S C H E - O R L O W

