

Introduction

THIS BOOK WORKS—AS THE title suggests—towards a theology of relationship. While this scope is rather broad, the focus lies on the vertical dimension, the God-human relationship. The driving question is the following: What does the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner contribute to a theology of relationship for the twenty-first century? Consequently, Brunner’s central analogy of relationship is analyzed in light of current relationship science in order to build a solid foundation for further research aiming in the same direction. However, before we start it makes sense to consider the broader context.

a) Relationships Are Booming

We live in an era of relationality and relationships. While the actuality and the content of these terms¹ are debatable, the present, nevertheless, might be considered a unique point in history as relations are considered of utmost importance in almost every field of science and society which is often referred to as a “relational turn.”² Clearly, pop culture is permeated by the topic of relationships, reflected in songs, movies, books, and self-help workshops. Social networks like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook

1. See section 7a for a detailed definition of these terms.

2. See, e.g., Shults, *Theological Anthropology*, 11–33; Fretheim, *God Enters*, 4; Dépelteau, “Relational Turn”; Quick, “Taking a Relational Turn”; Fernández, “Taking the Relational Turn,” 163; Selg, “Two Faces,” 27.

and YouTube appear to be dominant means of personal and relational “transportation.”³ However, this relational focus is not only the status quo of everyday life but also increasingly pervades academia in a variety of disciplines and forms.⁴ For example, on the one hand, even in non-social fields like physics the relationships are now emphasized over the substantials.⁵ On the other hand, the rise of neuroscience has shown that the human brain “is designed for social relationships,”⁶ which brings us to the social sciences. Since relationships are the epicenter of human existence,⁷ a turn from individuals to relationships is perceivable in the field of psychology, especially represented by the so-called *relationship science*, which will be investigated and instrumentalized in Part III. Furthermore, pedagogy experiences a movement to relationships taking center stage⁸ and even in business literature, an understanding of human relationality and relationships is considered key.⁹ With that said, all of the above is reflected and summarized in particular grand theories within sociology focusing on relations and relationality. One of the foremost and most influential examples is Hartmut Rosa’s *Resonanz* (resonance), a sociology of world relationship. Rosa’s opus magnum reflects on (late) modernity’s loss of and quest for meaningful connection—resonance—to each other, the world, and also the “vertical,” the transcendent.¹⁰ However, Rosa is not simply interested in a description or diagnosis of humanity’s relationality and being in the world. He rather proposes resonance as a radical,

3. For a brief critical evaluation of these virtual relations, see Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership*, 141, 144–45.

4. A good example for the intersection between pop culture and the sciences is the bestselling book Brooks, *Social Animal*.

5. Shults, *Theological Anthropology*, 18–19. Shults mentions particle physics, quantum theory, and chaos theory as examples. However, his view is questioned as too lopsided by Wisse, “Truly Relational Theology,” 151–52.

6. Kenrick et al., “Evolutionary Life History Perspective,” 13. See also Beckes and Coan, “Integrative Neuroscience of Relationships,” 703.

7. Regan, *Close Relationships*, 18–19; Reis et al., “Emergence of Relationship Science,” 559; Gergen, *Relational Being*, xv.

8. See, e.g., Krautz, *Beziehungsweisen und Bezogenheiten*; Künkler, “Relationalität und relationale Subjektivität”; Künkler, *Lernen in Beziehung*; Brozio, *Vom pädagogischen Bezug*. Brozio also draws from relationship science.

9. See, e.g., Hochman, *Relationship Revolution*; Covey, *Seven Habits*, 7–11. Covey implicitly draws on relationship science’s *interdependence theory* (see the appendix for its basics) for his framework.

10. Rosa, *Resonanz*, 522, 596, 599–600, 621, 623–24, 677, 688, 706–7, 722, 739.

normative conception, a leitmotif for human flourishing and the good life.¹¹ As such, Rosa's study transcends sociology and brinks on a philosophy that characterizes, encapsulates, and echoes the current turn to relationality very well.¹² Hence, the context is set for the main field and question of this book: what about relationality and relationships in Christian faith and theology or, even more specifically, the relation between God and humans?

b) Evangelical Shibboleth: A Personal Relationship with God

Unquestionably, relationships have always been central within Christianity, be it human relationships or the relation to the divine. Within all the different strands of the Christian Faith, "the thinking of God in relationship and as reason of all relationship represents a persistent 'identity marker'."¹³ This is reflected in a rich history of Christian spirituality, in hymns and modern worship songs and also in the general behavior and faith-praxis of common Christians around the globe: God and faith are personal and relational.¹⁴ That said, there is one Christian strand that has especially emphasized a personal relationship with God: Evangelicalism.¹⁵ As such, the expression "a personal relationship with God or Jesus Christ" is one of the central markers of this movement¹⁶ and can encompass the whole of the Christian life; accordingly, it is widely preached¹⁷

11. Rosa, *Resonanz*, 19, 53, 59, 62, 747–48, 756. We will further evaluate Rosa's proposal in section 10b.

12. For a similar, less encompassing, Anglo-American conception, see Gergen, *Relational Being*. He writes as a psychologist (influenced by John Thibaut and *interdependence theory*), yet sketches a sociology and philosophy.

13. Hartenstein, "Relationalität als Schlüssel," 165 (TM).

14. For a recognition of this fact from the field of psychology see, e.g., Ickes et al., "Closeness as Intersubjectivity," 357.

15. It is not unproblematic to define *evangelical* and to clearly distinguish it from *charismatic* or *fundamental*. Furthermore, the history of Evangelicalism in England or the US, although connected, is different from its history in, e.g., Germany or Switzerland. For an in-depth discussion of these issues, see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*; Stanley, *Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*. For works considering the future of evangelicalism in light of current issues, see Gushee, *After Evangelicalism*; Noll et al., eds, *Evangelicals*.

16. See, e.g., Schulz and Plüss, "Evangelikalismus," 114–16.

17. For a study on the content of American Protestant churches, see Witten, *All Is Forgiven*.

and used as a distinction from and even dissociation against other forms of religiosity and spirituality. However common this expression and focus on a personal relationship, it is recently and increasingly challenged even outside of academia and from within the evangelical movement.¹⁸ While accrediting some value, common points of discontent prevail, namely, that this phrase and concept is not found in the Bible, is only a metaphor, and appears too individualistic.¹⁹ Further critique concerns the confusion it produces about the nature of the relationship one can have with God, that it is the language of secularity,²⁰ and that it has a therapeutic inclination.²¹ Consequently, it is proposed that instead of “the language of relationship” one should use “the language of faith” like *being in Christ*²² or speaking of a *covenant* with God.²³ Others are more differentiated and perceive that the validity of the phrase and concept depends on its meaning, on the definition of *relationship* and *personal*. Preston Sprinkle, for example, points out that *personal relationship* can wrongly mean private or individual²⁴ but also, justly, that it is a real relationship with real persons involved.²⁵ Thus, it certainly is probable that the historical and societal context has altered the meaning of the expression²⁶ and that it has become an empty phrase that could be called an evangelical “shibboleth.” Personally, I can understand and confirm this somewhat disrespectful label and the corresponding critique. Having grown up in a traditional Swiss evangelical free church, talk about a personal relationship with Jesus was ubiquitous but so were the above-mentioned problematic side effects that accompany this expression. Later I started my theological education at the *Theologisches Seminar St. Chrischona* near Basel and reflected my experience theologically. As a consequence, I began to realize that I was

18. For an alternatively Catholic critique see, e.g., Boyd, “Problem.”

19. Spalink, “Personal Relationship with God”; Suk, “Personal Relationship with Jesus.”

20. Suk, “Personal Relationship with Jesus.”

21. Witten, *All Is Forgiven*, 35, 53, 130–32.

22. Suk, “Personal Relationship with Jesus.” See also his deeply personal book: *Not Sure*. Interestingly, the content of his conclusion, while rejecting the terminology, is very similar to what will be proposed as *personal correspondence* in this work.

23. Spalink, “Personal Relationship with God.” This is one of the objections that will be discussed in more detail in section 9e.

24. Hinting at Johnny Cash’s song “Personal Jesus.”

25. Sprinkle, “Having a Personal Relationship with Jesus.”

26. For some insights into the history of the phrase *personal Savior*, see Viola, “Origin of Personal Savior.”

as dissatisfied with the abstract-philosophical tendencies within academic theology as I was with the pietistic-evangelical interpretations of the Bible, which lead to a quest for a third way.

Thus, while we acknowledge and underscore many of the critical points being made, the central thesis of this book holds that the human's interaction with the divine actually is very personal and is very much an actual relationship. Furthermore, it will be proposed that, therefore, the analogy and language of relationship is the most adequate mode to speak about the Christian faith and consequently should be the leitmotif in theology. This undertaking and its motivation are implicit in the work's title *Towards a Theology of Relationship*. Having said that, besides the observation that in theology over centuries "Western thought has suffered from a systematic blind spot for relations"²⁷ while focusing on abstractions, the widespread lack of reflection concerning the God-human relationship might be considered an almost equal shortcoming.²⁸ Thus Thomas Oord comments, "the nature of this 'relationship' is rarely examined, but a necessity" since "the answers we give to fundamental questions have an impact upon every area of life."²⁹ However, there are some more or less contemporary exceptions to both of these shortcomings that should be mentioned, theologians who have given relationality or relationship a focal position within their thought. Some of them (it is by no means a complete list) will be adumbrated in the next section and consulted throughout this work as discussion partners.

c) Emil Brunner: Unique among Relational Theologians

Famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth is considered by some as one of the prime examples of a relational theology³⁰ but has only been examined exclusively from a relational perspective in the last two or three decades.³¹ Within the same timeframe, many so-called open and rela-

27. Brümmer, *Model of Love*, 33–34, 156. See also Gunton, *The One*, 6; Balswick et al., *Reciprocating Self*, 21; Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 39.

28. Boschki, *Religionspädagogik*, 17–18, 405. Boschki refers to theology as well as to pedagogy. See also Sattler, *Beziehungsdenken*, 332–34, who perceives the theological reflection primarily within the category of covenant.

29. Oord, *Uncontrolling Love*, 27.

30. See, e.g., Balswick et al., *Reciprocating Self*, 32; Cavey, *End of Religion*, 37.

31. See, e.g., Meyer zu Hörste-Bührer, *Gott und Menschen*; Deddo, *Theology of Relations*.

tional theological conceptions have emerged, associated with names like Gregory Boyd,³² Thomas Oord,³³ John Sanders,³⁴ Clark Pinnock,³⁵ John Polkinghorne,³⁶ William Curtis Holtzen,³⁷ and others.³⁸ A third major stream of a relational understanding of God, in particular, and the Christian faith, in general, is the trinitarian theology represented by a variety of theologians like the Greek Orthodox John Zizioulas,³⁹ the Catholic Gisbert Greshake,⁴⁰ the Protestants T. F. Torrance⁴¹ and Colin Gunton,⁴² the Lutheran Robert Jenson,⁴³ the Baptists Stanley Grenz⁴⁴ and Stephen Holmes,⁴⁵ the Charismatic Thomas Smail,⁴⁶ and Karl Barth being considered among them as a forerunner. Whilst these three major theological strands come closest to a comprehensive theology of relationship, however, in chapter 2 they are briefly evaluated, and explanation is given for why this book will not be based on any of them.

That said, there have been other relational theological endeavors.⁴⁷ From the Catholic tradition there is most famously Karl Rahner,⁴⁸ but also lesser-known theologians like the German Reinhold Boschki with his work on religious education “*Beziehung* als *Leitbegriff der Religionspädagogik*, or Dorothea Sattler’s soteriology *Beziehungsdenken in der*

32. See, e.g., Boyd, *God of the Possible*.

33. See, e.g., Oord, *Uncontrolling Love*.

34. See, e.g., Sanders, *God Who Risks*; Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*.

35. See, e.g., Pinnock, *Openness of God*

36. See, e.g., Polkinghorne, *Love*; Polkinghorne, *Entangled World*.

37. See, e.g., Holtzen, *God Who Trusts*.

38. For a brief introduction, see Oord et al., *Relational Theology*. For an in depth overview and a history of open theism, see Schmid, *Gott ist ein Abenteurer*.

39. See, e.g., Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*.

40. See, e.g., Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*.

41. See, e.g., Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*.

42. See, e.g., Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*; Gunton, *The One*.

43. See, e.g., Jenson, *Systematic Theology*.

44. See, e.g., Grenz, *The Social God*; Grenz and Ford, *Created for Community*.

45. See, e.g., Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*.

46. See, e.g., Smail, *Like Father, Like Son*.

47. For an alternative list, see Holtzen, “*Dei Fide*,” 62–63.

48. See, e.g., Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*. For a summary of his relational focus, see Boschki, *Religionspädagogik*, 283–88. Rahner appears in many respects (e.g., God’s self-disclosure) very similar to Emil Brunner (see chapter 5).

Erlösungslehre, and the works of Stefan Oster,⁴⁹ to name a few. There is also a growing number of biblical scholars and exegetes discovering *relationship* as a central hermeneutical leitmotif. Some German examples are Hans-Joachim Eckstein's studies on faith,⁵⁰ Walter and Raphaela Bührer's collective volume *Relationale Erkenntnishorizonte in Exegese und Systematischer Theologie*, Emmanuel Rehfeld's study *Relationale Ontologie bei Paulus*, or Volker Rabens's Pauline and Johannine studies.⁵¹ John Barclay could be mentioned as a well-respected British scholar, his relational lens being exemplified by his book *Paul and the Gift*, and Paul Anderson, as an American proponent, with his relational focus on the Gospel of John.⁵² Examples of some more encompassing biblical theologies with relationship as center are presented by Terence Fretheim concerning the Old Testament,⁵³ and by Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays for the whole of Scripture.⁵⁴ Furthermore, theologians like Peter Knauer,⁵⁵ Wilfried Härtle,⁵⁶ and in a sense also LeRon Shults,⁵⁷ offer *relational ontologies*. Some theologians contribute to a relational understanding of God-human interaction with love as focal point, such as Vincent Brümmer and his important philosophical-theological works,⁵⁸ Edward Vacek,⁵⁹ John Peckham,⁶⁰ Gerald Bray's relational systematic theology,⁶¹ or Anders Nygren's classical work.⁶² There are also some relational theological anthropologies or ethics revolving around divine-human encounter like

49. See, e.g., Oster, *Person-Sein*.

50. See, e.g., Eckstein, *Glaube als Beziehung*; Eckstein, *Gerechte*.

51. Rabens, *Holy Spirit and Ethics*; Rabens, "Sein und Werden."

52. See, e.g., Anderson, *Living Waters*.

53. Fretheim, *God and World*; Fretheim, *God Enters*.

54. Duvall and Hays, *Relational Presence*.

55. See, e.g., Knauer, "Ontología Relacional"; Knauer, *Glaube kommt vom Hören*; Knauer, *Verantwortung des Glaubens*. Knauer was influenced by Gerhard Ebeling who was one of Emil Brunner's students.

56. See, e.g., Härtle, "Relationale Erkenntnistheorie."

57. See, e.g., Shults, *Doctrine of God*; Shults, *Anthropology*.

58. See, e.g., Brümmer, *Personal God*; Brümmer, *Love*.

59. Vacek, *Love*.

60. Peckham, *Love of God*.

61. Bray, *God Is Love*. Sadly, Bray confirms some of our critique of the evangelical use of *personal relationship with God* since he does not or only poorly define the terms and takes them as a given.

62. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*.