

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 73 (2017)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** Emil Brunner : a Theologian for the Academy and Church Today  
**Autor:** McGrath, Alister  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877619>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 14.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Emil Brunner

## A Theologian for the Academy and Church Today<sup>1</sup>

In his time, Emil Brunner (1889-1966) was acclaimed as one of the greatest and most influential theologians of the twentieth century, especially in the United States of America.<sup>2</sup> From the 1930s to the early 1960s, he exercised an extensive and pervasive influence on American and British theologians and preachers.<sup>3</sup> In the period of post-war theological reconstruction in the 1950s, Brunner was widely seen as offering the church a defensible and positive platform from which to begin its reconnection with society and the world of ideas.

Yet Brunner is largely forgotten today. Scholarly interest in Brunner stalled in the 1970s, and declined dramatically thereafter. Where once there had been a torrent of publications and doctoral theses concerning Brunner, both in English and German, this rapidly dwindled to a trickle.<sup>4</sup> Brunner now tends to be remembered somewhat inaccurately simply as someone who (unsuccessfully) defended natural theology against Karl Barth in 1934. Brunner is now rarely the subject of theological monographs or articles; he is more often used to provide an angle of gaze or point of comparison from which to assess and understand others – most notably, of course, Barth.<sup>5</sup>

We cannot speak of Brunner without acknowledging his complex and difficult relationship with Barth. Even in the 1920s, Brunner realized that he was overshadowed by Barth, and eventually learned to live with this, however re-

1 A revised version of a lecture given to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brunner's death at a conference organized by the University of Zürich on 12 September 2016. See also: A. McGrath: *Emil Brunner*, Oxford 2014.

2 F. Jehle: *Emil Brunner*, Zürich 2006, 569ff. Note also: G. Ebeling: *Die Beunruhigung der Theologie durch die Frage nach den Früchten des Geistes*, *ZThK* 66 (1969) 354-368.

3 J.R. Nelson: *Emil Brunner*, *CCen* 83 (1966) 486.

4 See the thorough analysis in M.G. McKim: *Emil Brunner*, Lanham 1996.

5 See, for example, J.C. McDowell: *Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope*, *IJST* 8 (2006) 25-41. Brunner often stands in the middle of complex theological debates, and thus tends to be excluded from consideration by those who find it easier to adopt or defend their extremes: see M.G. McKim, *Brunner the Ecumenist*, *CTJ* 32 (1997) 91-104.

luctantly. As one of Brunner's more perceptive colleagues remarked in 1933,<sup>6</sup> Brunner's troubled relationship with Barth was a «totally personal cross» that Brunner would have to learn to bear. Some have suggested that Brunner had an «inferiority complex» in relation to Barth,<sup>7</sup> which led him to cultivate Barth's personal acquaintance and seek his theological approval for his projects.

It has long seemed to me that there is a need to reappraise the theological legacy of Emil Brunner, removing him from Barth's lengthening shadow and allowing him to be appreciated in his own right. He may have fallen out of theological fashion; he nevertheless offered, and, I must emphasise, continues to offer, a vision for Christian theology and the life of the Christian church which resonates with the concerns of today. Brunner has not been refuted; he has simply been neglected.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Rehabilitating Brunner: Challenges and Possibilities*

It is my view that Brunner needs to be reconsidered and rehabilitated – not in his totality, but certainly in relation to some of his methods and approaches, which retain validity and significance, especially in the theological and cultural climate which has developed in the west in the twenty-first century. In this article, I want to map out some areas in which Brunner's ideas have relevance for this new situation. But first, we must consider why Brunner has been neglected since his death.

In one sense, Brunner has been the victim of an historical happenstance, over which he had no control. Brunner always stood in the shadow of Karl Barth, and was gradually eclipsed by him, even during his lifetime. Yet Barth's growing reputation cannot be considered to be the only, or even the most important, reason for the decline in Brunner's reputation after the 1960s. With the publication of the final volume of Brunner's *Dogmatics* in 1960, it was obvious that Brunner's depth of theological exposition was inferior to that of Barth.<sup>9</sup> Brunner's decline in the face of Barth's growing eminence was thus neither unexpected nor unmerited.

6 Jehle: Emil Brunner (note 2), 295.

7 See, for example, Eduard Thurneysen's letter to Barth on this point, written on 21 October 1930; Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel. Zürich, 1974, vol. 3, 56.

8 See the comments of C.B. Brown: The Personal Imperative of Revelation, SJT 65 (2012) 421-434.

9 For a more sympathetic account of Brunner's dogmatics, see G. Lunghini: Emil Brunner, Brescia 2009, 105ff.

Yet Brunner, it must be conceded, contributed significantly to his own eclipse. Let me briefly note two issues of relevance here. First, Brunner's engagement with the Bible is often somewhat superficial and somewhat idiosyncratic. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is found in his distinction between the «formal» and «material» aspects of the *imago Dei*, which displays a lack of serious engagement with a biblical theme which has been the subject of intense discussion by biblical scholars.<sup>10</sup> Brunner's sermons tend to use biblical texts as their point of departure, rather than as their expository foundation. Brunner's only major work of biblical exegesis is his 1938 commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, which is best seen as a catechetical, rather than a scholarly work. The contrast with Barth is striking; even those who disagree with Barth's interpretation of the Bible, or his understanding of its theological authority, can hardly overlook the major role that biblical engagement plays in his theological project.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Brunner tends to dismiss his opponents somewhat peremptorily, often denigrating or even dismissing entire theological categories or approaches as a result of his concerns about some of their individual representatives. His 1924 work *Die Mystik und das Wort*, for example, dismissed Schleiermacher in an almost cavalier manner, failing to show any concern for, or attentiveness towards, the specific limitations of the intellectual context in which Schleiermacher developed his theological approach. Barth, though himself a critic of Schleiermacher, felt that this work was far too shrill in its tone, and shallow in its analysis to be of any use to the task of theological reappropriation.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Brunner's dismissal of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Christ also seems somewhat superficial, particularly when compared with the more nuanced and appreciative approach of Barth.

This troubling aspect of Brunner's approach caused him difficulties during his short and awkward period as a visiting professor at Princeton Theological Seminary (1938-9).<sup>13</sup> Brunner's somewhat simplistic dismissal of Reformed Orthodoxy's doctrine of the «Word of God» alienated many conservative Presbyterians

10 For examples of the modern scholarly discussion relevant to Brunner's approach, see P. Schwanz: *Imago Dei als christologisch-anthropologisches Problem*, Halle 1970; G. Kruhöffer: *Der Mensch – Das Bild Gottes*, Göttingen 1999.

11 See, for example, B. McCormack: *Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament*, *LuthQ* 5 (1991) 211-225.

12 K. Barth: *Brunners Schleiermacherbuch*. *ZZ* 7 (1924) 49-64.

13 McGrath: Brunner (note 1), 172ff.

in the United States, who saw Princeton as a bastion of Reformed Orthodoxy in the United States. Brunner bluntly rejected Reformed Orthodoxy's attitude to the Bible as a mere *Bibelglaube* (a «faith in the Bible», rather than in the one to whom «the Bible bears witness»), and suggested that its understanding of faith was consequently a rationalist *Fürwahrhalten* (the «holding of certain beliefs to be true»). The *tone* of Brunner's theological pronouncements thus alienated many who might otherwise have been sympathetic to the substance of his approach, and willing to consider where it might lead – even if this might take them beyond their theological comfort zones.

It is a matter for regret that Brunner seems to have played a significant role in his own decline. Yet this is not to say that his theological contribution can – or should – be ignored. There are good reasons for suggesting that Brunner has bequeathed a useable legacy to the twenty-first century, especially to the Reformed churches in Switzerland. I want to explore, however briefly, six significant points at which I believe Brunner deserves to be brought back into contemporary theological discussions and debates. He clearly has the potential to enrich and stimulate those reflections.

### *1. The Reformed Tradition: Broadening the Range of Possibilities*

The Reformed tradition is rightly recognized as representing one of the most intellectually rigorous and productive approaches to theology, philosophy, and spirituality. Many – such as myself – who are not confessionally Reformed take this tradition with the greatest seriousness, recognizing its significance and value across a wide range of disciplines. Barth and Brunner were both strongly committed to the Reformed theological community and churches. Yet the Reformed tradition is not monolithic, culturally or theologically. Since the 1960s, some would argue that the tradition has come to define itself increasingly with reference to Barth,<sup>14</sup> who has come to be seen as a standard-bearer for Reformed theological convictions across many constituencies which would earlier have considered him of questionable Reformed provenance and orthodoxy.<sup>15</sup>

14 See B. McCormack: *The End of Reformed Theology. The Voice of Karl Barth in the Doctrinal Chaos of the Present*, in: W.M. Alston Jr. / M. Welker (Ed.): *Reformed Theology*, Grand Rapids 2003, 46-64.

15 *Evangelicalism is a case in point*: S.W. Chung: *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids 2006.

Yet the Reformed tradition is open to redirection and redefinition, in the light of ongoing dialogue with its own past, and the new cultural situations that it faces. It cannot be frozen into a set of doctrines and attitudes. Many in North America now speak of the «Reformed objection to natural theology»,<sup>16</sup> as if the Reformed tradition had a common understanding of what natural theology is, and why it was to be rejected. Yet this simply amounts to allowing certain views within the Reformed tradition to assume normative or privileged status. Brunner unquestionably represents a Reformed voice in theology. Yet in terms of its presuppositions and its outcomes, Brunner's method differs from that of Barth at several points of importance, while remaining authentically Reformed in its emphasis and outlook. For example, Brunner gives priority to Calvin over later interpreters of Calvin, and offers readings of the Reformed tradition which diverge from that of Barth – most notably on natural theology.

2. *A Theology of Nature: The Basis of Natural Law, Theology, and Science*

Brunner's flawed 1934 debate with Karl Barth is often framed in terms of «natural theology», despite the fact that its focus clearly lies elsewhere. Yet the point I wish to emphasise is that Brunner's theological approach in this debate – and elsewhere around this time – unquestionably mandates a new appreciation for the significance of nature. Brunner never departed from his fundamental assertion that, as a consequence of its created character, the natural order possessed some «permanent capacity for revelation (*dauernde Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*)».<sup>17</sup> Brunner was emphatic that the human ability to discern this revelation was attenuated, and that it was only alleviated in the case of those whose «blindness had been healed by Christ». This is not a «natural theology» in the sense of offering rational proofs for God's existence, but more in the sense of intuiting God's presence and character from reflection on the created order, and finding such knowledge confirmed, extended, and above all transformed through divine self-disclosure. A full and proper knowledge of God results only from «self-disclosure, a self-manifestation of God – that is, when there is revelation».<sup>18</sup>

16 L.L. Garcia: Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection, in: C.S. Evans / M. Westphal (Ed.): Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge. Grand Rapids 1993, 112-133.

17 E. Brunner: Ein offenes Wort, vol. 1, Zürich 1981, 345.

18 E. Brunner: Dogmatik I, Zürich 1959, 24ff.

Yet there is little doubt that Brunner's understanding of the doctrine of creation mandates and encourages a new theological attentiveness towards multiple aspects of the natural order. It creates conceptual space for certain forms of natural law, natural theology, and an understanding of the natural sciences.<sup>19</sup> In the first place, Brunner sees such an understanding of creation as authorizing the natural sciences, both as an intellectual enterprise in its own right, and as a legitimate calling for a Christian believer. Indeed, Brunner offers a theology of creation which indicates that a believer will engage the natural world to greater effect than others. «The world is only knowable as something created by *God* through divine revelation; but, as *created* by God, it is the subject of legitimate scientific investigation.»<sup>20</sup>

The creation of the world by God undergirds «the mathematical order of the material world, which bears witness to the thought of the creator.»<sup>21</sup> Brunner's theological anthropology – especially his understanding of the *imago Dei* – gives added weight to his affirmation of the legitimacy of the natural sciences.<sup>22</sup> Brunner's theological framework creates conceptual space for dialogue between theology and the natural sciences. In this respect, Brunner differs significantly from Karl Barth, whose suspicions about any such conversations are well-known.<sup>23</sup> Brunner's careful calibration of the scientific disciplines allowed him to offer a positive theological mandate for the interaction of Christian theology and the natural sciences, which respected their respective limits, precommitments, and methods. Despite his anxieties about the naturalist precommitments of psychology, for example, Brunner was nevertheless able to note its potential importance for theological reflection.

Brunner's contribution to the dialogue between Christian theology and the natural sciences was not especially significant in terms of its substance. His importance lies more in the theological angle of approach that he advocates, which creates space for a theologically legitimate and intellectually enriching exploration of themes and methods. Barth's weakness in this area indicates the

19 E. Brunner: Dogmatik II, Zürich 1972, 32.

20 Ibid., 40.

21 Ibid., 32.

22 Ibid., 42.

23 H. Schwarz: Das Verhältnis von Theologie und Naturwissenschaft als systematisch-theologisches Problem, NZSTh 11 (1969) 139-53.

need for alternative approaches. Brunner's lies to hand, and remains a viable option in the twenty-first century.

Although Brunner was not an exponent of a «natural theology» in the traditional sense of the term as «knowledge of God obtained independently of God's revelation», there is no doubt that he affirms the notion of a natural knowledge of God, paralleling in most respects Calvin's exposition of this notion. Brunner does not see this as «proving» anything, least of all the existence of God; he does, however, see it as an important element of a broadly apologetic strategy, through which the Christian churches can connect their proclamation with the world of their audiences.<sup>24</sup>

Yet perhaps Brunner's reconnection with the Reformation's reflections on natural law is to be considered as his most significant contribution to a theology of nature. Brunner's careful analysis of human justice was based on his belief that humanity, left to its own devices, constructed notions of justice which were subservient to the vested interests of the powerful. Brunner's experience of the rise of totalitarianism led him to emphasise that the will of God was the ultimate foundation of human notions of justice, no matter how imperfectly they reflected this foundation. It is clear that there is renewed interest today within Protestantism, especially in the United States, in the notion of «natural law»;<sup>25</sup> Brunner's theological reflections on this theme remain relevant, and have considerable potential for catalysing further development of this important notion, especially within the Reformed tradition.

### *3. Cultural Engagement: The Theological Foundations of Apologetics*

Brunner's theological legitimation of apologetics remains of landmark importance, especially given the new challenges faced by the churches today in secularising cultures today. By 1929, Brunner had become aware of the need for the churches to engage the culture of their day – not in an intellectually opportunistic manner, but using approaches which were deeply rooted in Christian

24 For my own reflections on Brunner's approach, see A. McGrath: *Re-Imagining Nature*, Oxford 2016, especially 174f.

25 For example, see S.J. Grabill: *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics*, Grand Rapids 2006; D. VanDrunen: *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, Grand Rapids 2010.

theology. Although Brunner initially used the term «eristic» to designate this «other task of theology»,<sup>26</sup> it is clear that the general approach he adopted is better understood in terms of «apologetics» – understood both as the challenging of prevailing cultural assumptions, and the identification and exploitation of ways in which the Christian proclamation can be brought into contact with contemporary cultural concerns.<sup>27</sup>

Brunner was convinced that this was not an arbitrary or illegitimate approach, but that it was mandated and endorsed by the nature of the Christian faith itself. At a time when ideologically-driven political movements were gaining traction in Western Europe, Brunner offered the churches a theological platform from which such developments could be interpreted, engaged, and potentially redirected. On 13 December 1932, Brunner wrote to Barth, setting out a theme that he was coming to realize was of critical significance: theology, it now seemed to him, was «fundamentally nothing other than a specific form of evangelisation – namely, the struggle against pagan thought (*der Kampf gegen das heidnische Denken*).»<sup>28</sup>

Disappointed at what he increasingly regarded as Barth's tendency merely to say «No» to culture, Brunner offered an approach which allowed the critical evaluation and appropriation of cultural trends. Although Brunner saw theology as having a critical role in facilitating and resourcing cultural engagement, he never understood this as a simple affirmation or rejection of cultural trends, concerns, or norms. Brunner's approach of critical appropriation and engagement is easily pilloried as inconsistent, in that it offers neither a monolithic «yes» or «no» to the world of culture. Yet Brunner's achievement here is to demonstrate how a theological framework can be used to evaluate or «filter» culture, identifying appropriate modes of approach and engagement. Theology allows the evaluation of individual cultural themes, rather than entailing the prejudgement that all are to be rejected.

26 See especially Brunner's article «Die andere Aufgabe der Theologie», in: Brunner: Ein offenes Wort (note 17), 171ff. For the importance of this theme in the Barth-Brunner correspondence, see W. Kramer: «Die andere Aufgabe der Theologie». Ein bleibendes Anliegen Emil Brunners im Briefwechsel mit Karl Barth, ThZ 57 (2001) 363-379.

27 P. Vogelsanger: Theologie als Apologie des Glaubens, in: Ders. (Hg.): Der Auftrag der Kirche in der modernen Welt. Festgabe zum 70. Geburtstag von Emil Brunner, Zürich 1959, 75-88.

28 Karl Barth – Emil Brunner, Briefwechsel 1911-1966, Zürich 2000, 212.

By providing theological criteria for cultural engagement, Brunner's approach enables the church to take a principled and consistent approach to its context. The churches are not required to offer an unconditional «No!» or «Yes!» to their cultural context, but are able to filter and evaluate developments, and respond to them as appropriate. This enables the churches to avoid becoming cultural ghettos, disconnected from wider culture on the one hand; or merely cultural clones with merely a religious or spiritual patina on the other. Brunner offers the churches a middle way here, encouraging engagement and connectivity with contemporary culture on the one hand, while safeguarding them against a destructive cultural assimilation on the other.

#### 4. *Rediscovering the Church as a Community of Faith*

Brunner's experience of American Protestant Christianity helped him to grasp the importance of Christian community for the resilience of the churches, and their capacity to reach out to their broader culture. During the 1930s, Brunner explored the apologetic and theological implications of what he saw as a move away from a New Testament conception of the church towards a more institutionalized concept of the church which became dominant in the Middle Ages, and which shaped the emergence of the Swiss Reformed churches in the sixteenth century. Brunner's fundamental concern was that modern Swiss Protestantism had lost sight of the New Testament's emphasis on the church as an organic community of believers.<sup>29</sup>

The *ekklesia* of the New Testament, the community of Christ, is precisely not what every «church» is at the least – an institution, a «something». The community of Christ (*Christusgemeinde*) is nothing other than a fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) of persons ... As the Body of Christ, it is not an organization, and has nothing of an institutional character about it.

As a matter of historical fact, Brunner concedes, the word «church» has come to have strongly institutional associations, especially within Roman Catholicism. Yet the «replacement of a communion of persons (*Persongemeinschaft*) by a juridical (*rechtlich*) institution»<sup>30</sup> was a matter of historical contingency, not

29 E. Brunner: *Das Missverständnis der Kirche*. Zürich 1951, 12f.

30 *Ibid.*, 19.

theological propriety. For Brunner, the Reformation made clear that this development was reversible.

One of the factors that shaped Brunner's approach to the *ekklelesia* was his experience of working with Christian organizations, such as the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions under John Mott, and the Oxford Group Movement.<sup>31</sup> Brunner suggested that many Christians found a fellowship in this and other organizations which is lacking in churches. Brunner's experience of American Christianity allowed him to point to examples of churches in which the generation of Christian community took priority – such as Harry Emerson Fosdick's interdenominational Riverside Church in New York, which Brunner identified as a prime example of a church which recognized the importance of fellowship over institutional concerns.<sup>32</sup> For Brunner, traditional churches that are defined and constituted primarily as institutions appeared to show a reduced capacity to connect up with emerging cultural concerns for community and fellowship within post-war society.

So can a church exist without being or becoming an institution, at least in part? Brunner's concerns for the future of traditional churches reflects his belief that institutional agendas and interests were hindering many churches from identifying and articulating the vision that lay at the heart of the New Testament *ekklelesia*. Brunner recognized that it was a sociological inevitability that «fellowships» should become «institutions», but nevertheless insisted on the importance of not being *defined* by institutional markers.<sup>33</sup> As Brunner puts it, an institutional form of the church is the «covering, shell, and agency» of the *ekklelesia*.<sup>34</sup> The institution enfolds, protects, and propagates the *ekklelesia*. But it is not part of its essence, which Brunner believed he had seen in movements such as the YMCA and the Oxford Group Movement, which

31 E. Brunner: Dogmatik III, Zürich 1960, 129ff. Brunner distanced himself from the Oxford Group Movement after it reconstituted itself as «Moral Re-Armament» in 1938, seeing this as marking the adopting of an ideology that was alien to its original intentions.

32 Ibid., 131. On the significance of Riverside Church, see R.M. Miller: Harry Emerson Fosdick, New York 1985, 200ff.

33 Brunner was particularly impressed by the Mukyōkai («No-Church») movement, founded in Japan in 1901 by Kanzō Uchimura (1861-1930), and which was still active fifty years later, when Brunner was reflecting on these themes. See the comments in: E. Brunner: Die christliche Nicht-Kirche-Bewegung in Japan, EvTh 4 (1959) 147-155.

34 Brunner: Dogmatik III (note 31), 141ff.

positioned themselves at a critical distance from church institutions. Brunner's own reflections on the nature and purpose of the YMCA suggested to him that it had a legitimate claim to be considered an *ekklesia*, in the New Testament sense of the term.<sup>35</sup>

Surely there is something to be learned from Brunner here – not merely his emphasis on the church as a Christian fellowship, but also from his understanding of how this correlates with the responsibility of Christian mission. Mission is thus integral to the lives of individual believers and the ministry of the Christian community. Brunner made this point in a lecture delivered in London in 1931, which seems to me to be highly relevant to the ministry and mission of churches in Switzerland today:<sup>36</sup>

Mission work does not arise from any arrogance in the Christian Church; mission is its cause and its life. The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith.

This slogan – «The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning» – has become one of Brunner's best-known theological maxims. Churches cannot simply exist as social institutions; they must also be bearers of the gospel.

Brunner seems to me to have been ahead of his time here. He navigates the interface between two very different conceptions of a church: a *state church*, which has an important social function and identity, even if this is grounded more in historical contingency than theological necessity; and a *community of believers*, which sustains the heartbeat of the church, offering fellowship and affirmation. These two notions can be held together, as Brunner makes clear; yet they are not the same. Brunner offers a theological framework here for reflecting on church growth and consolidation. Many in Switzerland are now looking towards British or American sources for inspiration in the field of outreach and evangelism. It is, however, important to appreciate that there is a native Swiss resource that could be incorporated into these reflections.

35 Jehle: Emil Brunner (note 2), 507ff.

36 E. Brunner: *The Word and the World*, London 1931, 108.

### 5. *Personalism: The Defence of Relational Identity*

Brunner's influential *Wahrheit als Begegnung* set out a style of theology that was deeply concerned with analysing relations – relations between human beings, but above all between human beings and God. Writers such as Martin Buber and Ferdinand Ebner had earlier sought to reaffirm the importance and distinctiveness of individual human identity in terms of relationships. We establish ourselves as individual humans by transcending whatever generalized accounts we might use to define humanity in general. Ebner and Buber were both concerned about the depersonalizing tendencies of reductionist accounts of human nature that appeared to be gaining ground after the Great War in the Weimar Republic.<sup>37</sup> Buber's critical distinction between the realms of the «I» and the «It», between *Erfahrung* and *Begegnung*, succinctly expresses the manner in which a human being – a *someone* – can be reduced to *something*, to an abstraction, to a mere chemical formula or biological role.<sup>38</sup>

Brunner developed such «personalist» approaches,<sup>39</sup> partly to clarify the nature of truth, yet also to defend the Christian understanding of God against metaphysical abstraction and to secure a robust understanding of human nature that was secured in and through being «addressed» and loved by God. Although Karl Barth expressed concern that Brunner was making his theology dependent on a freestanding philosophy of existence, Brunner saw the loose philosophical framework provided by Buber and Ebner as essentially heuristic and descriptive, offering an angle of approach that enabled certain core themes, already known to Christian theology, to be articulated and examined more rigorously.

It is no accident that Brunner came to see anthropology as being of central importance to the theological task. While Brunner had some good theological

37 For such developments, see L. Koch: Die Depotenzierung des Menschen im kollektivistischen Denken der Weimarer Republik – Zu Johannes R. Becher und Ernst Jünger, in: H.J. Schmidt / P. Tallafuss (Hg.): Totalitarismus und Literatur, Göttingen 2007, 39-54.

38 For such concerns in the writings of Martin Heidegger during the 1930s, see S.E. Faye: Der Nationalsozialismus in der Philosophie. Sein, Geschichtlichkeit, Technik und Vernichtung in Heideggers Werk, in: H.J. Sandkühler (Hg.): Philosophie im Nationalsozialismus, Hamburg 2009, 135-155.

39 For the general trend, see B. Langemeyer: Der dialogische Personalismus in der evangelischen und katholischen Theologie der Gegenwart, Paderborn 1963. On Brunner's use of this approach, see R. Rössler: Person und Glaube, München 1965.

reasons for this judgement,<sup>40</sup> the cultural backdrop to this development is the growing trend towards «depersonalization» which Brunner saw in the rise of the totalitarian state, of whatever political complexion. Brunner came to see the notion of a «personal God» who addressed humanity as safeguarding the uniqueness of each individual human being. *Der Mensch im Widerspruch* remains one of the finest works of theological anthropology of the twentieth century, and continues to provide insights about «authentic existence» which go beyond the rather bland formulae of existential theologies.

Brunner's approach supports those social and political structures which are capable of affirming and supporting individual human beings, while at the same time discouraging social fragmentation in the form of isolated and disconnected individuals. Brunner's personalism led him to commend federal political structures, which he regarded as achieving a judicious balance of power between social structures and individual human beings. For Brunner, humanity always stands in the midst of a network of relations; the negotiation of their centres and limits stands at the heart of political and social existence.

Yet Brunner's personalism also safeguards some important theological themes – such as the fundamental idea that God is able to address humanity; that God's revelation is neither mystical (that is to say, contentless) nor purely ideational (taking the form of mere information). It is fundamentally *personal*. Humanity's identity is thus constituted *relationally* – initially, in the relationship established by being part of God's created order, and subsequently through a new relationship resulting from the decision to respond to God's address.

Brunner's explorations of the notion of «person» offer a rigorous theological framework for understanding both nature of revelation as disclosure of information about God and the self-communication of a personal God, which is to be embraced in an act of personal decision, rather than mere intellectual acceptance. In an age in which depersonalization remains a serious threat, Brunner's theological defence of God as the ultimate ground and guarantor of personal identity remains significant, and ought to be allowed to feed into contemporary discussions.

40 See McGrath: Emil Brunner (note 1), 133ff.

6. *The Trinity: A Plea for Theological Modesty*

Although the doctrine of the Trinity played a major role in some leading Protestant writers of the early modern period – such as the American Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) – it came increasingly to be relegated to the margins of Protestant systematic theology in the era prior to the First World War, partly on account of anxieties concerning the rational foundations and theological utility of the doctrine. Karl Barth's innovative reading of the theological utility of the doctrine in the late 1920s is widely regarded as having been of critical importance in bringing about a revival of Trinitarian theology, which saw the doctrine moving from the periphery to the centre of Christian theological reflection.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the doctrine of the Trinity can reasonably be said to have returned to centre stage,<sup>41</sup> playing a major role in Christian reflections on a substantial range of issues. This recovery of confidence in the characteristically Christian understanding of God is to be welcomed, particularly as the theological reinstatement of Trinitarianism has been accompanied by a growing understanding of its roots in the theology of the patristic age, which have corrected misunderstandings which have hindered proper reflection on contemporary reformulations of the doctrine.<sup>42</sup>

The resurgence in Trinitarian thought has, however, been accompanied by a number of less welcome developments, such as the emergence of social models of the Trinity which are open to criticism, partly on account of their inflated conceptualities, and perhaps more significantly on account of their tendency to read culturally dominant anthropological categories into a doctrine of God.<sup>43</sup>

Brunner offers an alternative reading of the theological *function* of the doctrine of the Trinity, which serves as an important counterbalance to the current tendency towards Trinitarian inflationism. Brunner does not treat the doctrine of the Trinity as the foundation of anything – such as the possibility of revelation. For Brunner, God's capacity for self-revelation depends on the divine self-identity, which may be articulated in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>44</sup>

41 R.T. Leupp: *The Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, Downers Grove 2008.

42 An excellent example is L. Ayres: *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, New York 2004.

43 For example, see S.A. Coakley: 'Persons' in the 'Social' Doctrine of the Trinity. A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion, in: S.T. Davies / D. Kendall SJ / G. O'Collins SJ (Ed.): *The Trinity. An interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, Oxford 2002, 123-44.

44 Brunner: *Dogmatik I* (note 18), 209.

Brunner insists that the doctrine of the Trinity is not itself part of the New Testament proclamation, but is the outcome of theological reflection on that proclamation.<sup>45</sup> The Bible does not speak of a «triune God», nor can one speak of the doctrine of the Trinity as a revealed truth; this way of speaking – which Brunner insists is legitimate – arises from «reflection on the truth given in revelation».<sup>46</sup> It is essential, he argues, to be able, not simply to distinguish between «what is «given» in revelation and reflection upon it», but also to be clear about what criterion is to be used in making such a distinction.<sup>47</sup>

For Brunner, hostility towards the doctrine of the Trinity on the part of many Christians reflects unease about forms of speculative theology which seem to have become detached from the biblical proclamation of revelation and redemption. «How often, and at how many points, has the dogmatism of orthodox theology driven people, who would otherwise have been open to a truly biblical theology, into its opposite – rationalism!»<sup>48</sup> Brunner instead offers an approach to the Trinity which is anti-speculative, seeing it as the outcome of reflection on the core themes of the Christian proclamation – the actuality of divine revelation and salvation in Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup>

The church's doctrine of the Trinity, established by the dogma of the early church, is not a biblical *kerygma*, therefore it is also not the *kerygma* of the church, but is a theological defensive doctrine (*eine theologische Schutzlehre*) for the core faith of the Bible and of the church. It therefore does not belong to what the church has to preach, but it belongs to theology, in which it is the purpose of the church to scrutinize its message, in the light of reflection on the Word of God given to the church.

It is not necessary to have a firm grasp of the complexities of intra-Trinitarian relationships; indeed, Brunner indicates scepticism about the merits of any such speculation. The New Testament writers had no intention of developing a doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine is a development of the ideas of the New Testament «which the church places before the faithful in her theology.»<sup>50</sup> The «mystery» at the heart of the New Testament is not the «intellectual para-

45 M.A. Schmidt: Der Ort der Trinitätslehre bei Emil Brunner, ThZ 59 (1949) 46-66.

46 Brunner: Dogmatik I (note 18), 241.

47 Ibid., 242.

48 Ibid., 243.

49 Ibid., 209.

50 Ibid., 230.

dox» of the doctrine of the Trinity, but the proclamation that «the Lord God became incarnate and endured the cross for our sake». We may indeed maintain an «attitude of reverent silence» in the face of the mystery of God; instead of «constructing a *mysterium logicum*» we ought to renounce any attempt on the part of human reason to «penetrate a region that is too high for us». <sup>51</sup>

Brunner's approach counters the metaphysical inflationism and conceptual complexity of much recent thinking about the Trinity; above all, it reconnects the doctrine of the Trinity with the world of the New Testament, and the life and witness of the church. By presenting the doctrine as the outcome, not the presupposition of faith, Brunner renders the apologetic task of the church considerably easier. There is a need for Brunner's modest – yet theologically defensible – account of the Trinity to be brought back into play in contemporary discussion, not least on account of a resurgence of cultural concern about the intrinsic rationality of faith, resulting partly from the recent rise of the «New Atheism».

#### *Conclusion*

In this lecture, I have offered what I fully concede to be a brief and inadequate assessment of the ongoing significance of one of Switzerland's greatest theologians. Let me end with my own favourite quotation from Brunner. «There is indeed an *evangelium perennis* but not a *theologia perennis* ... The gospel remains the same, but our understanding of the gospel must ever be won anew.» <sup>52</sup> For Brunner, the Christian gospel demanded and deserved constant rearticulation and restatement, without losing sight of its changeless and timeless relevance.

Brunner was resistant to the petrification of something that was meant to be dynamic and living, capable of adaptation to new situations and challenges. As we saw earlier, Brunner thus does not see ecclesiology as something that is fixed and given; rather, it is something that emerges through constant engagement with the context within which the Christian community finds itself. Theology finds itself in dialogue and debate with a rapidly shifting cultural backdrop. We need exemplars to help us reflect theologically on the challenges and opportunities that confront us in our rapidly changing context. Like both Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, Brunner is an ecclesially engaged theologian,

51 Ibid., 231.

52 E. Brunner: *Toward a Missionary Theology*, CCen 66 (1949) 816-818 (816).

with a real concern for and commitment to the ministry of the church, especially in his native Switzerland. He remains a significance resource for both the academy and the church today, fifty years after his death.

*Abstract*

The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner (1889-1966) has faded from prominence in both the church and the academy since his death fifty years ago. He nevertheless remains a significant resource for contemporary theological reflection and reconstruction, as well as for the mission of the church. This article identifies six areas in which Brunner continues to offer insight and wisdom to both the academy and the church. Brunner enables an enriched understanding of the Reformed theological tradition; a continuing engagement with the natural order, including the natural sciences; a credible and theologically informed apologetic; the rediscovery of the church as a community of faith; the affirmation of relational understandings of human identity; and a critique of recent inflationary accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Die Aufmerksamkeit, die dem Schweizerischen Theologen Emil Brunner (1889-1966) in der Kirche und in der akademischen Theologie seit seinem Tod vor 50 Jahren zuteil geworden ist, hat merklich nachgelassen. In diesem Beitrag werden sechs Impulse und Themenfelder benannt, in denen Brunners Theologie auch in der Gegenwart von Bedeutung ist: Sie befähigt zu einem tieferen Verständnis der reformierten theologischen Tradition, leitet an zu einer theologischen Reflexion der Naturordnung und damit zum Dialog mit den Naturwissenschaften, weist den Weg zu einer glaubwürdigen Apologetik, hilft die Kirche als Gemeinschaft des Glaubens neu zu entdecken, propagiert und affirmiert ein relationales Verständnis menschlicher Identität und drängt die in der Gegenwart oft inflationär gebrauchte Trinitätslehre zurück.

*Alister McGrath, Oxford*