



ALISTER E. McGRATH

EMIL  
BRUNNER

A Reappraisal

WILEY Blackwell



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*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK  
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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# Preface

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. From the 1930s to the early 1960s, it is arguable that no single theologian exercised so extensive and pervasive an influence on American and British theologians and preachers.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to see why Brunner garnered such acclaim and gained such a following. Few have failed to notice his grace and clarity of theological exposition, his easy familiarity with the ways and concerns of British and American Christianity, and his clear commitment to the life and witness of the church.

His rise to fame in the English-speaking world was as inevitable as it was justified. Brunner spent two year-long periods as a visiting professor at seminaries in the United States, and delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures at St Andrew's University in 1946–7. In the period of post-war theological reconstruction in the 1950s and 1960s, he 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. Austin Farrer (1904–68), perhaps one of the finest Anglican theologians of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> was one of many English-speaking theologians of the 1930s to recognize Brunner's merits. After reading Brunner's *The Mediator*, he commented in a letter of March 1931 that Brunner "is Barth with the rhetoric pulled out and thought inserted in its place".<sup>3</sup>

Yet today Brunner is largely forgotten. Even in his native Switzerland, interest in him is dwindling. The Emil Brunner Stiftung, founded in February 1973 to promote interest in Brunner and produce editions of his works,

<sup>1</sup> J. Robert Nelson, "Emil Brunner – The Final Encounter." *Christian Century* 83, no. 16 (1966): 486.

<sup>2</sup> Robert MacSwain, "Above, Beside, Within: The Anglican Theology of Austin Farrer." *Journal of Anglican Studies* 4 (2006): 33–57.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Philip Curtis, *A Hawk among Sparrows: A Biography of Austin Farrer*. London: SPCK, 1985, 79.

was dissolved in November 2011.<sup>4</sup> What was once a torrent of publications concerning him has dwindled to a trickle. Rarely is he 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, Karl Barth.<sup>5</sup> Brunner is often read through a Barthian interpretative lens, and found to be wanting by Barthian standards – especially in relation to their controversy of 1934.<sup>6</sup>

Brunner's complex relationship with Barth remains incompletely understood. 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. Brunner wanted to be affirmed by Barth and at the same time felt threatened by him. For his part, Barth never had a particularly high regard for Brunner, and gradually came to see no reason to conceal this.

Although this tension in Brunner's attitude towards Barth is probably best seen in the years immediately preceding the 1934 controversy over natural theology, it had clearly developed earlier. In the autumn of 1927 Barth was invited to explore the possibility of returning to Switzerland from Germany to take up a chair in dogmatics at the University of Berne. He mentioned this to Brunner, and asked what he made of the possibility.<sup>8</sup> Brunner's reply, though positive in some respects, indicated unease over the move, partly because of the potentially negative impact on his own reputation in Switzerland, and partly because of its implications for student enrolment at Zurich.<sup>9</sup> In the end, nothing came of the move; yet this development presaged similar anxieties when Barth eventually left Germany to

<sup>4</sup> The Stiftung was founded and supported by the Evangelisch-Reformierte Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich. See Handelsregisteramt des Kantons Zürich, record CH-020.7.900.670-0.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, John C. McDowell, "Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 25–41. A further point to be noted here is that 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 Mark G. McKim, "Brunner the Ecumenist: Emil Brunner as a *Vox Media* of Protestant Theology." *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 91–104.

<sup>6</sup> Claus Westermann, "Karl Barth's Nein. Eine Kontroverse um die theologia naturalis. Emil Brunner–Karl Barth (1934) in perspektiven des Alten Testaments." *Evangelische Theologie* 47 (1987): 386–95; Klaus-Peter Blaser, "Communiquer l'incommunicable révélation: Le conflit Barth–Brunner revisité à la lumière de leur correspondance." *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* 78 (2003): 59–67; Gerhard Sauter, "Theologisch miteinander streiten: Karl Barth's Auseinandersetzung mit Emil Brunner." In *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935): Aufbruch – Klärung – Widerstand*, ed. Michael Beintker, Christian Link, and Michael Trowitzsch, 267–84. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Eduard Thurneysen's letter to Barth on this point, written on 21 October 1930: *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*. 3 vols. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974, vol. 3, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Barth to Brunner, 30 October 1927: *Karl Barth–Emil Brunner, Briefwechsel*, 159–60. See further Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*. London: SCM Press, 1976, 175–6.

<sup>9</sup> Brunner to Barth, 1 November 1927; *Karl Barth–Emil Brunner, Briefwechsel*, 160–3.

return to Switzerland in 1935 as a result of his opposition to National Socialism. Even in the 1920s, Brunner realized that he was overshadowed by Barth, and eventually learned to live with this, however reluctantly. As one of Brunner's more perceptive colleagues remarked in 1933,<sup>10</sup> Brunner's troubled relationship with Barth was a "totally personal cross" that Brunner would have to learn to bear.

It has long seemed to me that there is a need to reappraise the theological legacy of Emil Brunner. He may have fallen out of theological fashion; he nevertheless offered, and 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 been neglected.<sup>11</sup> More than a generation has passed since his death, and such a reconsideration is clearly overdue.

This work is not primarily a biography of Brunner, nor an introduction to his theology. It is an exploration of the development of his thought, primarily in the 1920s and 1930s, set against the intellectual and cultural context of the age, leading into an assessment of his theological vision, and an attempt to make connections with our own context. In the course of the volume, I shall consider traditional questions of historical importance (such as Brunner's place in the development of dialectical theology, and the historical emergence of his theological vision) and theological interest (such as his complex – and generally misunderstood – views on natural theology). Yet Brunner's comprehensive vision of the tasks and possibilities of theology allowed apologetics, mission, ethics, social responsibility, pedagogy, practical theology, and preaching to be woven together as interconnected aspects of a coherent and greater whole, rather than forcing them to be seen as isolated and independent themes. It is a powerful, compelling account of the theological enterprise, which cries out to be engaged, assessed, and applied.

This book has taken a quarter of a century to write. Much of the research originally underlying it was undertaken at the University of Zurich in 1986 and 1989. My primary reason for visiting Zurich on both occasions was to make use of its research archives specializing in sixteenth-century intellectual history, especially in the University of Zurich's Institute for Swiss Reformation History. The university's Faculty of Theology was located in the same building, allowing me to begin a serious and extended engagement with Brunner's works, and the secondary literature concerning him.

It took a long time to reflect on my initial readings of Brunner, setting them against the context of the intellectual history of western Europe in the twentieth century, and my own reflections on the tasks of theology. The

<sup>10</sup> Frank Jehle, *Emil Brunner: Theologe im 20. Jahrhundert*. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2006, 295.

<sup>11</sup> See the comments of Cynthia Bennett Brown, "The Personal Imperative of Revelation: Emil Brunner, Dogmatics and Theological Existence." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 4 (2012): 421–34.

recent publication (2006) of Frank Jehle's reliable and thorough biography of Brunner<sup>12</sup> prompted me to bring together some lines of thought that had been preoccupying me for more than two decades, leading to the present study. This extended process of reflection has allowed me to understand and appreciate Brunner more deeply, and suggests that the time has come to reconsider his significance for the challenges facing both the academic discipline of theology and the needs of the churches in the twenty-first century.

Alister E. McGrath  
King's College London, 2013

<sup>12</sup> See n. 10 above.

# A Note on Translations and Editions

Brunner's works, listed in the bibliography at the end of this study, are referred to by their short titles, in English or German.<sup>1</sup> Where a work has been translated into English, the English short title has been used within the text to refer to it. Thus *Der Mensch im Widerspruch* is referred to as *Man in Revolt*, despite the failure of this English title to reflect Brunner's key anthropological theme of "contradiction", which is explicitly stated in the original German title. (Brunner occasionally expressed irritation and frustration over the English titles of his works.)

Unusually for a German-speaking theologian of that period, Brunner was perfectly comfortable lecturing in English. As a result, several of his major books, which were based on lectures originally delivered in the United States and Great Britain, were published in English, and never appeared in German during his lifetime – most notably, his Gifford Lectures at St Andrew's University. Some of his works originally published in German were never translated into English, and are referred to only by their German short titles.

Although Brunner has been fortunate in having many English translators,<sup>2</sup> this has led to a certain degree of inconsistency in rendering his often dense German prose, occasionally made worse by the decision to omit material deemed to lack interest to English-speaking readers. There are also points at which Brunner's theological intentions have been rendered opaquely, and occasionally inaccurately. Given these difficulties, I have made my own translations of his original German works throughout this study, and refer readers on to the appropriate place in existing English translations. Brunner's German, especially in his early writings, is not always

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Brunner's shorter publications are referred to in the collected edition *Ein offenes Wort: Vorträge und Aufsätze 1917–1962*. 2 vols. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Most notably, the formidable Olive Wyon (1881–1966), but also including A. J. D. Farrer, John Holden, H. A. Kennedy, Harold Knight, Amandus W. Loos, John W. Rilling, and Bertram Lee Woolf.

easily rendered in English, forcing his translators to use paraphrases and circumlocutions more frequently than many would like. In translating, I have tried to be consistent wherever possible, while bringing out the theological sense of the original German.

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# Emil Brunner: The Origins of a Theological Mind, 1914–1924

Emil Brunner was born on 23 December 1889 in the Swiss city of Winterthur in the canton of Zurich.<sup>1</sup> His father, Heinrich Emil Brunner (1859–1926), was the youngest of six children, born into a “totally unbelieving family” in Oberrieden, on the south shore of Lake Zurich. This was a period of considerable political and social tension in German-speaking Switzerland, with liberals pressing for the secularization of the region’s educational system, and conservatives wishing to retain its religious orientation. To his family’s dismay, Brunner’s father decided to attend a Protestant teacher training school (*Evangelisches Lehrerseminar*) in Unterstrass, also in the canton of Zurich, which had been founded in 1869.

The *Evangelisches Lehrerseminar* at which Brunner’s father studied during the period 1874–8 had gained a considerable reputation as a centre of pedagogical and spiritual excellence under Heinrich Bachofner (1828–97). After qualifying as a teacher, Brunner secured a position at a Protestant school in Winterthur. Bachofner’s strongly Pietist spirituality had a profound influence on Brunner’s father, which was further consolidated by his marriage in 1884 to Sophie Hanna Müller (1862–1934). Sophie’s father was the pastor of the village of Dussnang, in the canton of Thurgau, noted for his emphasis upon biblically grounded theology and preaching. The couple had four children: Hanna Sophie (“Hanny”, 1886–1961), Maria Lydia (1887–1968), Emil (1889–1966), and Frieda Emma (1896–1964). In April 1893, the Brunner family left Winterthur to settle in the city of Zurich, where Brunner’s father had been appointed as primary teacher at the Gabler School House in the suburb of Enge.

<sup>1</sup> Frank Jehle, *Emil Brunner: Theologe im 20. Jahrhundert*. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2006, 19–32.

## Theological Studies at Zurich

Brunner's childhood was deeply shaped by his parent's strong religious beliefs, and their growing involvement in the Religious Socialist movement. Like many in Zurich at this time, Brunner was influenced by the pastor and writer Hermann Kutter (1863–1931), who developed a vision for a religious socialism that was both politically engaged and religiously grounded. Although Kutter argued that the essentially secularist Social Democrats were far more alert to social issues than their Christian counterparts, he insisted that a strongly Christian foundation was essential for any viable programme of social reform. Brunner was instructed and confirmed by Kutter at Christmas 1905.<sup>2</sup>

Yet although Brunner would remain concerned with political and social questions for the remainder of his life, it became clear to him at an early stage that the questions that really interested and concerned him were theological in character. In October 1908, aged 18, Brunner began to study theology at the University of Zurich.<sup>3</sup> His key concern was to find an “intellectually satisfying statement of his faith”.<sup>4</sup> Initially, he appears to have been particularly attracted by Zurich's church historian, Walter Köhler (1870–1947), a specialist in the thought of the Reformation. Brunner's prize-winning early essay “The Religious Ideals of Erasmus of Rotterdam” (1910) clearly reflects Köhler's influence.

Yet even at this early stage, Brunner had become aware of the importance of the English-speaking world. He attended the eighth conference of the World's Student Christian Federation held at Oxford from 15 to 19 July 1909,<sup>5</sup> at which he met leading figures in the international ecumenical movement – including the American Methodist layman John R. Mott (1865–1955). Brunner's Oxford visit reveals two of his most distinctive characteristics, which mark him off from many other Swiss theologians of his age – an ability to speak English, and a willingness to engage directly with the ideas and movements of the English-speaking world, crossing the barriers of language, nationality, and denominations.

The most significant early intellectual influence on Brunner came from Leonhard Ragaz (1868–1945), a close associate of Kutter, who was Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at the University of Zurich.<sup>6</sup> Critiquing capitalism for its commodification of humanity, Ragaz developed a theological foundation for a reaffirmation of the value of individuals in the sight

<sup>2</sup> For Brunner's relationship with Kutter, see Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 90–8.

<sup>3</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 33–47.

<sup>4</sup> “Intellectual Autobiography”, 5.

<sup>5</sup> For the importance of this event and its immediate predecessors, see John R. Mott, *The Christward Movement among the Students of the World*. London: World's Student Christian Federation, 1909.

<sup>6</sup> For Brunner's relationship with Ragaz, see Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 98–108.

of God.<sup>7</sup> He reinforced Brunner's growing conviction that personal and social transformation was impossible without a foundation in the living reality of God. Like Brunner, Ragaz recognized the importance of English-speaking theology. During his 1907 visit to Boston, Ragaz became familiar with the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), especially his *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907). Rauschenbusch's influence is evident in Ragaz's subsequent writings, particularly his sermons of 1909.<sup>8</sup> In 1914, Brunner dedicated his first significant published writing, *Das Symbolische in der religiösen Erkenntnis* ("The Symbolic Element in Religious Knowledge"), to Ragaz.

So what does *Das Symbolische* tell us about Brunner's ideas at this time? Theologically, it positions Brunner neatly within the mainstream of Swiss liberal Protestantism in the period before the Great War. Brunner regarded Immanuel Kant and F. D. E. Schleiermacher as having inaugurated the modern discussion of central theological themes, particularly in shifting the emphasis from allegedly "objective" conceptions of religious knowledge to subjective religious experience.<sup>9</sup> Religious knowledge is essentially experiential; "revelation" is essentially enlightenment.

The work echoes the anti-metaphysical approach to theology – especially Christology – characteristic of the liberal Protestantism of A. B. Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack.<sup>10</sup> Jesus of Nazareth was to be regarded as a religious exemplar or prototype, embodying the ethical values of the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> "Brunner regarded Jesus as a man possessing special religious knowledge, not a God-man who is identical with God as an object of religious knowledge."<sup>12</sup> There is an obvious and significant soteriological deficit in Brunner's understanding of Jesus of Nazareth at this point, partly reflecting any sense of ontological distinction between humanity and Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Jesus may clarify our understanding of God; he does not fundamentally alter our relationship with God. It is interesting to note that Brunner's Christology

<sup>7</sup> Leonhard Ragaz, *Das Evangelium und der soziale Kampf der Gegenwart*. 2nd edn. Basle: C. F. Lendorff, 1907. For a good account of Ragaz's ethics, see Robert Barth, "Leonhard Ragaz (1868–1945)." In *Schweizer Ethiker im 20. Jahrhundert: Der Beitrag theologischer Denken*, ed. Wolfgang Lienemann and Frank Mathwig, 9–32. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Leonhard Ragaz, *Dein Reich komme! Predigten*. Basle: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1909.

<sup>9</sup> *Das Symbolische in der religiösen Erkenntnis*, 2–3. For comment, see Yrjö Salakka, *Person und Offenbarung in der Theologie Emil Brunners während der Jahre 1914–1937*. Helsinki: Kirjapaino, 1960, 34–52; Heinrich Leopold, *Missionarische Theologie: Emil Brunners Weg zur theologischen Anthropologie*. Gütersloh: Mohn, 1974, 22–33.

<sup>10</sup> See Friedrich W. Graf, "Der 'Kant der Kirchengeschichte' und der 'Philosoph des Protestantismus.' Adolf von Harnacks Kant-Rezeption und seine Beziehungen zu den philosophischen Neukantianern." In *Adolf von Harnack: Christentum, Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft*, ed. Kurt Nowak, Otto Gerhard Oexle, Trutz Rendtorff, and Kurt-Victor Selge, 113–42. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Stephan Scheld, *Die Christologie Emil Brunners*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steinbeck, 1981, 50–6.

<sup>12</sup> Scheld, *Die Christologie Emil Brunners*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Scheld, *Die Christologie Emil Brunners*, 82–3.

#### 4 *The Origins of a Theological Mind, 1914–1924*

seems to rest on his epistemological presuppositions, suggesting that his understanding of the role of Jesus of Nazareth was shaped by an essentially philosophical framework.<sup>14</sup>

There are aspects of *Das Symbolische* which merit further discussion, perhaps most notably the manner in which its ideas – especially the ethical role of Jesus of Nazareth – echo the views of Ragaz, and the manner in which Brunner draws on Henri Bergson to develop his notion of “intuition”.<sup>15</sup> Yet for our purposes, the importance of the work lies in its illumination of Brunner’s theological starting point. In his “pre-dialectical” phase,<sup>16</sup> Brunner is clearly deeply embedded within the liberal Protestant consensus, even if his ideas are tinged with the hues of the prevailing forms of liberal Protestantism at Zurich, rather than at Berlin. Yet this initial statement of Brunner’s theological perspectives reveals someone who is at home with the ideas of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Harnack.<sup>17</sup> At this point, Brunner does not stand out from his cultural and theological background.

### Pastoral Ministry and Contacts in England

Brunner – like his Swiss colleagues Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974) – had little sympathy at this stage for the purely academic study of theology, or any notion of theology as an ecclesially disengaged activity. All three saw theology as linked to ministry, and above all to preaching. Brunner was studying theology in order to begin public ministry within the Swiss Reformed church. His initial pastoral responsibilities were in Leutwil, a small town in the canton of Aargau, some fifteen kilometres from the neighbouring village of Safenwil.

Brunner moved to Leutwil in September 1912 to deputize for pastor August Müller, who had become seriously ill. Following Müller’s death in office on 3 October, Brunner was ordained on 27 October 1912 at the Fraumünster

<sup>14</sup> Scheld’s puzzling suggestion that Brunner is quite close to Chalcedon at this point in his development seems to rest on a misunderstanding of Brunner’s concept of “symbol”: Scheld, *Die Christologie Emil Brunners*, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Salakka, *Person und Offenbarung*, 38, 40. Brunner’s undated *Habilitationsschrift* at Zurich (1915?) concerned “The Significance of H. Bergson for the Philosophy of Religion”: Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Brunner scholarship is divided over the periodization of his theological development. Salakka – writing before the publication of Brunner’s *Dogmatics* – suggested that three phases could be discerned: a “pre-critical” phase (1914–20), a “dialectical” phase (1921–8), and an “eristic” phase (1929–37). Others have added a fourth: his “dialogical” phase, which is best seen in his later writings, particularly his *Dogmatics*. See Roman Rössler, *Person und Glaube: Der Personalismus der Gottesbeziehung bei Emil Brunner*. Munich: Kaiser Verlag; Leopold, *Missionarische Theologie*.

<sup>17</sup> For some divergences at this point between Schleiermacher and Brunner, see Salakka, *Person und Offenbarung*, 46–7.

in Zurich, and served as interim pastor (*Vikar*) at Leutwil until April 1913, when he returned to Zurich to complete his academic studies and examinations. Although Karl Barth was pastor of the nearby village of Safenwil throughout Brunner's Leutwil period, there are no indications of any direct contact between them. On 31 July 1913, Brunner was examined on his thesis "Das Symbolische in der religiösen Erkenntnis" – published the following year under the same title – and graduated *summa cum laude*.

Brunner's sermons of this period clearly echo the themes of the religious socialism articulated by Ragaz. In a sermon of 12 January 1913, Brunner played down any thought of Christianity offering hope in the face of death; its primary role was to transform the situation of the living.

When [Jesus] speaks about the "Kingdom of God", he is talking first of all about this side of things. He does not want to bring a trusting hope for those who are dying, but speaks about a great future for the living. To put it briefly, the "Kingdom of God" will come on this earth – not as a rapture [*Entrückung*] into a better world through the entry door of death, but as a transfiguration [*Umgestaltung*] of our earthly life.<sup>18</sup>

Brunner was succeeded at Leutwil by Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974), who served as pastor in the community from 1913 to 1920.<sup>19</sup> Brunner's close friendship with Thurneysen began around this time. A significant correspondence developed, indicating a growing restlessness with some of the conventional theological wisdom of their age, catalysed to no small extent by the outbreak of the Great War in the late summer of 1914. It was during his period as pastor of Leutwil that Thurneysen developed a relationship with Barth, which would prove to be so theologically significant.

By the summer of 1913, Brunner was fully equipped to begin professional ministry in the Swiss Reformed church. Yet he chose not to do this, believing that his vocation as a theologian and churchman – the two were closely interlinked in his mind – demanded that he become proficient in the English language, not least in order to sustain and develop the contacts that he had made at the Oxford conference of 1909. In an unusual move, without any real parallel amongst his Swiss theological contemporaries, Brunner spent the academic year 1913–14 teaching French and Latin at high schools in England.

Brunner's first such appointment was at Winchester House School in Great Yarmouth, a port in the East Anglian county of Norfolk. This beautiful Victorian building was set in extensive grounds on a cliff top on England's east coast, with impressive views of the sandy bays around. Yet Brunner's experience at Great Yarmouth was not a success in terms of its academic

<sup>18</sup> Text in Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Thurneysen had previously served as assistant secretary of the Zurich YMCA (German: Christlicher Verein junger Menschen) from 1911 to 1913.

outcomes. Winchester House seemed more concerned about the reputation of its sports teams than its examination performances in either French or Latin.<sup>20</sup> In December 1913, Brunner wrote to Thurneysen, admitting that his time in Great Yarmouth had been something of a “fiasco”.<sup>21</sup> He resigned, and moved to London to consider his next move. Undeterred by his earlier unhappy experience, Brunner managed to find another teaching position – this time, as a teacher of French at West Leeds High School in Yorkshire. This proved much more satisfactory.

Brunner found his time in England to be politically stimulating, bringing him into contact with leading British socialists such as the future British prime minister Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937) and the future chancellor of the exchequer Philip Snowden (1864–1937). At the more intellectual level, Brunner was “particularly impressed” by the “Guild Socialism” then being articulated by the leading young Fabian theorist George Douglas Howard Cole (1889–1959).<sup>22</sup> He also became acquainted with the future archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple (1881–1944),<sup>23</sup> whom he met through the “Brotherhood Movement”, a British form of Christian socialism which flourished in the years before the Great War.<sup>24</sup>

However, the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 forced Brunner to return to Switzerland as quickly as possible. Having already undertaken military training in the infantry at Zurich in the late summer of 1909, he was placed on active service until early 1915. He was posted to the 69th Fusilier Battalion (*Füsilierbataillon*), which was stationed close to the French border.<sup>25</sup>

## The Swiss Crisis of Identity, 1914–1919

It is impossible to make sense of the emerging theology of the three great Swiss Protestant theologians of the twentieth century – Brunner, Barth, and Thurneysen – without understanding the nature of the national crisis through which Switzerland passed during the years 1914–19. Switzerland had expanded its territory after the resolution of the chaos resulting from the Napoleonic wars by the Congress of Vienna (1815), adding the canton

<sup>20</sup> For the origins of this emphasis on sporting achievement, see J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology*. Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> “Intellectual Autobiography”, 7. On this approach to socialism, see A. W. Wright, G. D. H. Cole and *Socialist Democracy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 72–99.

<sup>23</sup> For Temple’s later links with Brunner, see F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple: Archbishop of Canterbury. His Life and Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948, 370.

<sup>24</sup> Paul T. Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880–1940*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, 148.

<sup>25</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 59.

of Geneva; it also reaffirmed its commitment to political and military neutrality within the new European order then in the process of emerging.<sup>26</sup> It had no desire to become entangled in future European wars.

This doctrine was reaffirmed with the outbreak of war between the European Great Powers in August 1914.<sup>27</sup> Switzerland may have affirmed its neutrality; this did not, however, safeguard its territorial integrity. Pre-war strategic analysis had made it clear that the small nation was vulnerable to opportunistic territorial annexation by France, Germany, or Italy. Its neutrality had to be enforced through military mobilization.

Although Switzerland remained neutral during the Great War, it was profoundly affected by the conflict. In the east, the peoples of the Suisse Romande felt a natural affinity with France; the sympathies of western Switzerland lay firmly with Germany.<sup>28</sup> The fault lines reflected deep convictions about cultural identity between France and Germany.<sup>29</sup> Tensions soared. There was an open recognition of a massive gulf between the German- and French-speaking communities, which might easily have led to permanent fissure and national disintegration. At times, it seemed as if the nation would split, with the German-speaking cantons siding with Germany, and their French-speaking counterparts with France.

This tension expressed itself within the Swiss Christian socialist movement. Two of its leading lights – Hermann Kutter and Leonhard Ragaz – took very different positions on the “German question”. Kutter openly supported the German cause; Ragaz argued that Swiss Christians ought to oppose the war without taking sides, developing an anti-militarist theme that would recur in his later writings.<sup>30</sup>

The impact of the war on Swiss industry and commerce was devastating,<sup>31</sup> paving the way for industrial unrest. Food rationing had to be introduced in 1917. The national debt spiralled out of control. A national

<sup>26</sup> Edgar Bonjour, *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität*. Basle: Helbing & Lichtenbahn, 1978, 37–41.

<sup>27</sup> For a critical account of this development, see Max Mittler, *Der Weg zum Ersten Weltkrieg: Wie neutral war die Schweiz? Kleinstaat und europäischer Imperialismus*. Zurich: Verlag NZZ, 2003, 357–61.

<sup>28</sup> Jeannine Luczak-Wild, “Als der Graben aufklaffte: Vermittlung zwischen Westschweiz und Deutschschweiz? Das Scheitern der *Internationalen Rundschau* 1915.” *Schweizer Monatshefte für Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur* 4 (1997): 39–44.

<sup>29</sup> Gerd Krumeich, “Ernst Lavisse und die Kritik an der deutschen Kultur, 1914–1918.” In *Kultur und Krieg. Die Rolle der Intellektuellen, Künstler und Schriftsteller im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Wolfgang Mommsen, 143–54. Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> See Dittmar Rostig, *Bergpredigt und Politik: Zur Struktur und Funktion des Reiches Gottes bei Leonhard Ragaz*. Berne: Peter Lang, 1991.

<sup>31</sup> For the economic issues, see Roman Rossfeld and Tobias Straumann, eds., *Der vergessene Wirtschaftskrieg: Schweizer Unternehmen im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2008. For its religious aspects, see Christine Nöthiger-Strahm, *Der deutsch-schweizerische Protestantismus und der Landestreik von 1918*. Berne: Peter Lang, 1981, 69–206.



strike was called in November 1918, raising serious fears of a Bolshevik-type revolution in Switzerland, and causing a crisis within Swiss socialism.<sup>32</sup> Serious economic difficulties were exacerbated by political tensions. For Brunner, as for many others, the imperial German war policy called into question the basis and legitimacy of culturally assimilated forms of Protestantism.<sup>33</sup> Karl Barth and Brunner alike regarded ethics as grounded in theology,<sup>34</sup> and interpreted the *ethical* failure of the German churches in encouraging war through a *Kriegstheologie* (which often seemed to reflect pagan rather than Christian themes) as ultimately a *theological* failure,<sup>35</sup> demanding a radical theological correction.<sup>36</sup> So what could be done to recover from this theological crisis? How could theology recover its vision? This sense of unease is evident in the preaching of Barth, Brunner, and Thurneysen during this period, reflecting anxiety about the present situation and uncertainty about what lay ahead.<sup>37</sup>

During the Great War, Brunner served in various temporary positions, including assisting Hermann Kutter at the Neumünster in Zurich during the summer of 1915. Finally, Brunner was given his own pastoral respon-

<sup>32</sup> Markus Mattmüller, *Leonhard Ragaz und der religiöse Sozialismus: Eine Biographie*. 2 vols. Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957–68, vol. 2, 502–34. The writings of Barth, Brunner, and Thurneysen from this period suggest they saw this strike as a social and religious watershed, forcing reconsideration of earlier social and religious assumptions. Barth initially supported Ragaz, where Thurneysen supported Kutter: for the issues, see Barth's letter to Thurneysen of 8 March 1915: *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*. 3 vols. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974, vol. 1, 33.

<sup>33</sup> The term *Kulturprotestantismus* is often used to refer to this phenomenon. Recent studies have raised questions about whether this term is misleading, and suggested that it ought to be used with caution when referring to Wilhelmine Germany: see especially Friedrich W. Graf, "Kulturprotestantismus: Zur Begriffsgeschichte einer theologischen Chiffre." *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 27 (1984): 214–68; Gangolf Hübinger, *Kulturprotestantismus und Politik: Zum Verhältnis vom Liberalismus und Protestantismus im wilhelminischen Deutschland*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1994, 26–262.

<sup>34</sup> For the context, see Folkart Wittekind, *Geschichtliche Offenbarung und die Wahrheit des Glaubens: Der Zusammenhang von Offenbarungstheologie, Geschichtsphilosophie und Ethik bei Albrecht Ritschl, Julius Kaftan und Karl Barth (1909–1916)*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> See especially Karl Hammer, *Deutsche Kriegstheologie, 1870–1918*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1971; Günter Brakelmann, *Protestantische Kriegstheologie im 1. Weltkrieg*. Witten: Luther Verlag, 1974. For Barth's concerns about the apparent theological endorsement of militarism and nationalism in 1914, see Arne Rasmusson, "Church and Nation-State: Karl Barth and German Public Theology in the Early 20th Century." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 46 (2005): 511–24.

<sup>36</sup> For a good account of Barth's view of the relation of theology and ethics around this time, see John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, 11–39, challenging contemporary suggestions that "dialectical theology" was morally vacuous – as found, for example, in John Cullberg, *Das Problem der Ethik in der dialektischen Theologie*. Uppsala: Lundequist, 1938.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Thurneysen's 1917 sermon, speaking of a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and restlessness, and uncertainty about the future: Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben!* 2nd edn. Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1928, 133.



sibility. He was installed as pastor of the mountain village of Obstalten in the canton of Glarus, in eastern Switzerland, on 13 February 1916. One of most significant developments for Brunner around this time was his engagement to Kutter's niece Margrit Lauterburg (1895–1979) in May 1917, followed by their church marriage in October of the same year at Bremgarten, a small town near Berne.<sup>38</sup>

Barth served as pastor in the village of Safenwil from 1911 to 1921, and was a close neighbour of Thurneysen. Although it is impossible to establish either the date or the location of Brunner's first meeting with Barth, circumstantial evidence suggests that this probably took place at Thurneysen's home in Leutwil in the middle of February 1916. Thurneysen and Barth had studied theology together at the University of Marburg during the period 1908–9, and had developed a close friendship.<sup>39</sup> The two remained in close contact throughout the 1910s, and regularly met up. Brunner's first letter to Barth is dated 1 April 1916, praising a sermon of Barth's, yet registering hesitation over some of its theological gambits. It was a pattern of affirmation mingled with reservation that would continue over the coming years.

## Brunner and Dialectical Theology: The Origins of an Ambivalent Relationship

It would not be until 1920 that Brunner began what could legitimately be termed a “dialectical” phase in his theological development.<sup>40</sup> Before then, he is best seen as remaining within the pre-war theological liberal Protestant consensus, despite his growing misgivings about some of its assumptions, and his increasing willingness to explore alternatives – including the ideas beginning to be developed by Barth and Thurneysen.<sup>41</sup> Although a cooling of the friendship between Brunner and Thurneysen in early 1916 is suggested by a somewhat belated invitation to Brunner to attend Thurneysen's wedding,<sup>42</sup> it seems that by late 1918 Barth and Thurneysen had come to see Brunner as a useful dialogue partner in their theological discussions. He was someone who needed to be kept on side, even if there were questions about his commitment to their vision of “dialectical theology”.<sup>43</sup> Setting the

<sup>38</sup> For Brunner's period at Obstalten, see Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 69–85.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, 38.

<sup>40</sup> For his theological development during the period 1913–18, see Walter J. Hollenweger, “Wurzeln der Theologie Emil Brunners: Aus Brunners theologischer Entwicklung von ca. 1913 bis 1919.” *Reformatio* 13, no. 12 (1963): 579–87.

<sup>41</sup> Gabriele Lunghini, *Emil Brunner*. Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2009, 27–39.

<sup>42</sup> For an analysis of the changing relationship between Brunner and Thurneysen around this time, see Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 107–14.

<sup>43</sup> John W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916–1936*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001, 11–20.

Barth–Brunner correspondence alongside the Barth–Thurneysen correspondence for the period 1916–20, it becomes clear that Barth and Thurneysen saw themselves as sharing common themes, which they increasingly considered Brunner to fail to grasp.

Yet despite this incomplete harmony the three young theologians agreed to set out what amounted to a common public theological programme at a series of lectures, given at Leutwil from 4 to 6 February 1917. Thurneysen intended these lectures for his congregation to be delivered by colleagues who were sympathetic to a “new way” of doing theology. This “Bible Week amongst the People”, hosted by Thurneysen, was addressed by Brunner, Barth, and Gottlob Wieser (1888–1973) – all younger theologians, representing an emerging school of thought (at present, without any agreed name).

On Sunday 4 February, Brunner delivered the opening lecture, on “Awakening the Bible”. Wieser’s lecture, delivered the following day, dealt with the theme of “Hope in the Bible”. On 6 February, Barth spoke on “The New World in the Bible”. Barth’s lecture, now widely seen as a manifesto for his reforming theological agenda, seems to have generated the most interest on the part of the audience.

In a letter of 17 January, Thurneysen had hinted that he would prefer Brunner’s talk to be entitled “The Word of God in the Bible”.<sup>44</sup> In the event, Brunner’s address was somewhat critical of any such idea, preferring to speak of the “Spirit of the Bible” rather than the “Word of God”. Echoing the pre-war approach of Ragaz, Brunner called on his audience to allow the Bible to inspire and empower them, leading to the transformation of society:

What we need now is the Spirit of the Bible [*Bibelgeist*], not the sayings of the Bible [*Bibelsprüche*]; God, not statements of faith; power, not doctrines. This living word and living power are asleep in the Bible. But we must try to wake them up, to draw them out . . . If the Spirit of the Bible awakes within us, there would be an earthquake, compared with which all revolutions are but a children’s game. And the end result would be the kingdom of God on earth, the rule of righteousness, truth, and love.<sup>45</sup>

Brunner’s lecture helps us locate him on a theological map at this stage in his development, not least in relation to his explicit distancing of himself from excessively cognitive approaches to doctrine or the interpretation of the Bible. Yet his approach was not what Thurneysen hoped for, either pedagogically or theologically.<sup>46</sup> As he later remarked to Barth, not only had the audience found Brunner difficult to understand; his proposals stood at some distance from their own.

<sup>44</sup> Cited Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 88 n. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Cited Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> Thurneysen to Barth, 20 February 1917: *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, 175.

The truth of the matter is that Brunner did not see himself as part of any theological alliance or axis at this time. There never was any close relationship, personal or intellectual, with Barth. There was a friendship, certainly, reflected in Barth allowing Brunner to read his landmark Romans commentary in proof in November 1918. As a result, Brunner's review of the work was the first to be published, attracting considerable attention for that reason.<sup>47</sup> Brunner rightly declared that Barth's approach opened the way for a "theology focused on the Word of God".<sup>48</sup> Yet it is not entirely clear whether, and to what extent, Brunner himself wished to be aligned with the specifics of Barth's approach. In reviewing Barth's Romans commentary, Brunner – much to Barth's irritation – presented himself as a neutral assessor of its approach, not as one who himself espoused and advocated such a position.

The simple truth is that at this stage Brunner was finding his own way, trying to reconstruct his vision of theology in the light of the trauma of the Great War, and the deep and fundamental questions about theological method that this had raised in his mind.<sup>49</sup> Given that the cultural ideology of an earlier generation could not be sustained after the distress of the Great War, what was to replace it? How would this affect his reading of the Bible? Of the Reformed tradition? Of his theological mentors at Zurich? He welcomed the stimulus of others – such as the little volume of sermons by Barth and Thurneysen (1917)<sup>50</sup> – while declining to identify himself with them.

Brunner's writings of 1918–19 indicate two main concerns with the approach of Barth and Thurneysen. First, although there are clear signs that Brunner was beginning to appreciate the problems associated with subjectivist theological approaches by the beginning of 1918, he had no time for a simple inversion of such an approach, focusing on the alleged objectivity of divine revelation. In a letter to Thurneysen of January 1918 thanking him for the gift of a copy of *Suchet Gott*, Brunner expressed concerns about its "almost dangerously one-sided" approach, which seemed to him to

<sup>47</sup> "Der Römerbrief von Karl Barth", 29–32.

<sup>48</sup> For reflections on the origins and significance of such approaches to theology, see Dietrich Korsch, "Theologie als Theologie des Wortes Gottes: Eine programmatische Skizze." In *Transformationsprozesse des Protestantismus: Zur Selbstreflexion einer christlichen Konfession an der Jahrtausendwende*, ed. Martin Berger and Michael Murrmann-Kahl, 226–37. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999.

<sup>49</sup> For the impact of the Great War on European thought, see Dietrich Korsch, "La modernité comme crise: Stratégies conceptuelles en philosophie sociale et en théologie au sortir de la première guerre mondiale." In *La théologie en postmodernité. Actes du 3e Cycle de théologie systématique des Facultés de Théologie de Suisse Romande*, ed. Pierre Gisel and Patrick Evard, 33–63. Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1996.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben!* Berne: G. A. Bäschlin, 1917. Thurneysen presented Brunner with a copy of this book as a wedding present. This collection of essays includes Barth's "New World in the Bible", which is mistakenly dated to the autumn of 1916. Following the inclusion of this lecture in Barth's *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, it was omitted from subsequent printings of the sermons.