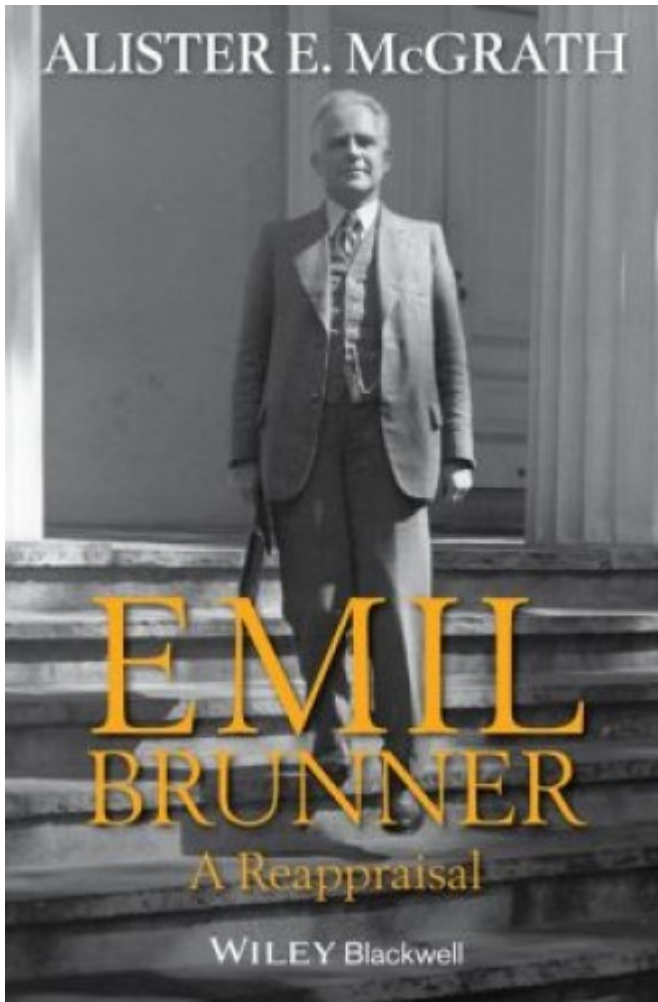


Emil Brunner: A Reappraisal, by Alister E. McGrath

reviewed by [I. John Hesselink](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Emil Brunner

By Alister E. McGrath

Wiley-Blackwell

For approximately 30 years—from 1930 to 1960—the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner was one of the most influential theologians in the world. Many of his major works, including *The Mediator*, *Man in Revolt*, *Revelation and Reason*, and *The Divine*

Imperative, were standard texts in mainline seminaries in Great Britain and the United States.

Yet today few theological students would recognize Brunner's name except in connection to his debate with Karl Barth over natural theology. Only a couple of his minor works are still in print, none of them in the United States.

Alister McGrath, professor of science and religion at Oxford University and one of Great Britain's leading theologians, has undertaken the task of reviving an interest in the Swiss theologian. He concludes this intellectual history of Brunner's life and thought with a plea for a recovery of Brunner's theology, arguing that it must be "taken seriously" because Brunner "offers us a vision of theology as a dynamic discipline, constantly seeking to ensure that the gospel is faithfully and effectively articulated in contemporary contexts."

Brunner grew up in Zurich, where his father was a teacher. As a young man he was influenced by his pastor, who had a vision for religious socialism, and later by Leonhard Ragaz, who taught theology in Zurich. A formative event for Brunner was his attendance at a conference of the World Student Christian Federation held in Oxford in 1909. His fluency in English would serve him well when he received a scholarship to study for a year at Union Seminary in New York.

After graduating from Zurich University, Brunner was installed as a pastor in the village of Obstalden. A year later he married Margrit Lautenberg. Eventually they had four sons, two of whom died prematurely. Margrit was very supportive of her husband's work. She read most of his manuscripts prior to publication, and her work enhanced their readability.

After some setbacks Brunner joined the theological faculty of Zurich University in 1921, where he remained until 1953, when he retired early to take a position at the International Christian University in Tokyo. However, once his reputation as a major theologian was established, he was invited to give lectures at multiple venues in Europe and the United States. He delivered the Gifford Lectures in St. Andrews, Scotland, in 1948.

Brunner's career and theology are inextricably bound up with those of Karl Barth. Their most famous conflict was about natural theology. In 1934, Brunner published a little work called *Nature and Grace*, which was indirectly a polemic against what he felt were "wrong turns in Barth's thought." Barth quickly responded "Nein," then

jumped on some unguarded statements that Brunner had made. Years later, Brunner developed his position in a more nuanced manner in the major work *Revelation and Reason*.

This was not the first disagreement between the two Swiss theologians, nor was it their last. Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, and Eduard Thurneysen had founded a journal in 1922 titled *Zwischen den Zeiten* (*Between the Times*) to express developments in what had come to be called dialectical theology. Brunner wrote an article in which he maintained that in addition to the first task of theology—to reflect on the Word of God—there is another, an apologetic (or, as Brunner put it, “eristic”) one. This task of theology is not primarily defensive, but positive: it is to challenge the ideologies and idolatries of the world. Here again Barth was unhappy, insisting that there is only one task of theology.

Other differences between the two involved their critiques of natural law, predestination, the sacraments, Schleiermacher (Barth was appreciative of one aspect of his theology), Christology (Barth accepted the virgin birth, Brunner didn’t), and communism (Barth tended to soft pedal its danger). Even so, they agreed on most of the fundamental articles of the Christian faith, and both wrote from a Reformed perspective. Over the years, the two warriors mellowed and the criticisms were less acerbic.

McGrath does not mention the fact that Barth went to the Zurich airport to see Brunner off for his trip to Japan. Nor does McGrath make much of the “historic encounter” that I arranged between Barth and Brunner in November 1960 in Basel, Switzerland. He simply remarks in a footnote that this meeting did not “lead to a reconciliation.” This is true as far as theology is concerned, but it was a sort of personal reconciliation. Both expressed to me their happiness about the meeting afterward. More important, when Barth learned that Brunner was nearing death, he sent a note to Brunner via Peter Vogelsanger, Brunner’s pastor and close friend. Barth apologized that his health did not permit him to come to Zurich, then added:

Tell him from me that if he is still alive and if it is possible, that I commend him to our God. And tell him most certainly that the time when I felt that I had to say “No!” against him is long past, and that we live only because a great and merciful God speaks his gracious “yes” to us all.

Brunner's theology should be measured on its own merit, however, and not simply vis-à-vis Barth. Accordingly, McGrath devotes a chapter each to Brunner's early seminal work *The Divine-Human Encounter* (translated as *Truth as Encounter* in a later edition) and to the importance of Brunner's theological anthropology, *Man in Revolt*, whose original German edition was titled *Der Mensch im Widerspruch* (*Man in Contradiction*). McGrath explains this contradiction in humanity as follows: "Humanity is created in the image of God, yet has decided to exist in opposition to its God-given destiny."

Brunner's anthropology turned out to be surprisingly relevant during the cold war. A woman in East Germany wrote to Brunner explaining that she had found *Man in Revolt* very relevant to their situation. But because it was long and complicated—and unavailable in East Germany—she had condensed it into a popular form and thought she could find a publisher. She gave it the title *Gott und sein Rebell* (*God and His Rebel*). Brunner was delighted and quickly approved her version.

Truth as Encounter was presented originally as lectures at Uppsala University in Sweden in 1937. Using insights he had gained from Søren Kierkegaard, Ferdinand Ebner, and Martin Buber, Brunner developed a fundamental theme of his theology: that we must overcome an excessive reliance on the subject-object antithesis. Brunner was against all types of false objectivism in theology. One form was the intellectualist understanding of the Christian faith. To him the shift from a personal understanding of faith to an intellectualist understanding was "the most fatal occurrence within the entire history of the church." According to Heinz Zahrnt, for Brunner "the relationship which prevails between God and man is that of a personal correspondence—this concept sums up everything which Brunner has to say about truth as encounter, and indeed is a most pregnant representation of his fundamental theological concern." Brunner expressed his position briefly as a slogan: "Beyond Orthodoxy and Pietism—biblical faith!"

The climax of Brunner's career was his acceptance of an invitation to become the first visiting professor of Christianity and ethics at the recently founded International Christian University in Tokyo in 1953. He saw this invitation as "a call from God." He had been in Japan briefly under the auspices of the YMCA shortly after World War II and had sensed the spiritual vacuum in the country. His response to the invitation to ICU was also an implementation of his missionary theology.

McGrath is correct in stating that “Brunner’s arrival in Japan was greeted with widespread acclaim” (I was there at the time). However, it was not universal, for the Kyodan (United Church) hierarchy did not appreciate Brunner’s fondness for the Mukyokai (nonchurch) movement in Japan, and his recent book *The Misunderstanding of the Church* was not received favorably in some quarters. Nevertheless, Brunner’s impact in Japan was significant. Brunner suffered a stroke en route back to Switzerland but was finally able to complete his three-volume dogmatics in 1960.

McGrath concludes his fine study with a chapter titled “Legacy: The Contemporary Significance of Emil Brunner’s Theology.” Here he notes that interest in Brunner stalled in the 1970s and declined rapidly thereafter. This was partly due to certain weaknesses in Brunner’s theology and partly due to the ascendance of Barth’s theology and the popularity of the theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Even so, McGrath suggests several areas in which Brunner’s theology can make an important contribution to theology in the 21st century: “He surely deserves to enter our theological conversations once more. His presence can only enrich our discussions.”