

Why Building on Emil Brunner?

a) Why Not Brunner?

At the time of his death in 1966, Brunner was perceived “as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century,” wielding a major impact on European and American Christianity and academic theology.¹ However, his theological presence has long since faded.² While Cynthia Bennett Brown’s and Alister McGrath’s recent work demonstrate that the man from Zurich may be ready for a comeback,³ and we propose below that indeed he is,⁴ this section focusses on how the work of a world-renowned, influential theologian could disappear like it did only a short time after his death.⁵ How, for example, could his “own” church, the Fraumünster in

1. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 225. See also Henry and Dockery, *Evangelicalism*, 143–44. Henry perceives Brunner’s influence in 1964/1965 greater than Barth’s. However, he already points out that Brunner’s theology is not taking center stage of the debate anymore.

2. Evidence of this is Brunner’s absence in “the lists” of famous theologians, either concerning theological history, accomplishments, influence, or concepts, whereas he would belong there. Due to the lack of space only a few examples are given: Balswick et al., *Reciprocating Self*, 32; Cavey, *End of Religion*, 37; Holtzen, “Dei Fide,” 62–63; Rehfeld, “Seinskonstitutive Christusbezogenheit,” 71–72, 78–79; Härle, “Relationale Erkenntnistheorie,” 15–32.

3. Brown, *Believing Thinking*; McGrath, *Emil Brunner*.

4. See section 2b.

5. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 225.

Zurich, reject a memorial service in honor of Brunner's one-hundredth jubilee in 1989 and host a Catholic "hunting service" instead?⁶ How was it that within his own homeland the foundation initiated in 1973 to "promote interest in Brunner and his works," was dissolved in November 2011?⁷ How can it be that the fiftieth anniversary of Brunner's death in 2016 was almost forgotten? After all, it was only through the reminder from a former pastor of the *Evangelical-Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich*, Benjamin Stükelberger, and through a meeting with Alister McGrath that the *Studienzentrum für Glaube und Gesellschaft* in Fribourg (CH) organized a convention in honor of Emil Brunner.⁸ The speculations are manifold.

Forgotten?

One reason for Brunner's disappearance is given by Mark McKim: whilst Brunner's views influenced many theologians "no specific Brunner school of thought or following developed."⁹ Secondly, the rise of the popular theologies of Pannenberg and Moltmann could be blamed in that they seemed to make Brunner obsolete.¹⁰ A third train of thought is that, put bluntly, the time of the "great teacher" is over. Hans Heinrich Brunner proposes that after World War II a change in perception occurred regarding authority figures. In the 1980s he observed that many theology students lost their interest in the great fathers of dogmatics.¹¹

6. This aired on Swiss radio show, "Regionaljournal ZH/SH," through broadcasting company Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen. Interestingly, Hans ten Doornkaat says in an interview in this radio report that Brunner would be more relevant for today than he was for his own time.

7. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, x. David Cairns had written in 1948 that "it must be a cause of pride for Switzerland" to have one of the greatest living theologians (Cairns, "Theology of Emil Brunner," 308). This time is long gone.

8. Personal email correspondence with Ralph Kunz from the *Studienzentrum für Glaube und Gesellschaft*, November 2017.

9. McKim, "Brunner the Ecumenist," 91. This is no coincidence but can be perceived as a natural consequence of his "unorthodox" view of theology (Kramer and Sonderegger, *Erinnerung*, 7, 10, 81, 95, 99, 113, 116, 117, 126, 129).

10. Henry and Dockery, *Evangelicalism*, 145–46. Ralph Kunz mentioned the same in a personal email (2017).

11. Brunner, *Mein Vater*, 167, 187. Ralph Kunz makes the same point (see above). He sees the reckoning of the '68 generation with their "fathers" as one of the main reasons and points to Hans H. Brunner's book about his father as proof of this.

Although he surely makes a valid point, it is perhaps too general since not every famous theologian of the twentieth century vanished from center stage; Karl Barth, as an example, raises interest to this day.¹²

This brings us to the fourth and main reason usually mentioned for Brunner's demise: Karl Barth. Whilst Brunner's nemesis at first did not have the same international recognition, he quickly did and soon Brunner became either only a footnote to Barth¹³ or mentioned within the context of their war over natural theology. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson capture this well: "It is not unusual in any field of scholarship to find a true giant overshadowed by the colossi. Emil Brunner's stature and influence in twentieth-century theology would be indisputable were it not for Barth and Bultmann who overshadowed him."¹⁴ Even Frank Jehle, who wrote the most comprehensive biography of Brunner to date, is keen to admit that if he would not have been asked, he would have never thought about writing it because Karl Barth had always been the center of his interest.¹⁵

A fifth reason follows naturally: Brunner's weaknesses. McKim considers Brunner's theological middle ground as one of the reasons for his vanishing: "His efforts often placed him in the theological center, where there is precious little room in contemporary Protestant thought."¹⁶ Grenz and Olson conclude similarly that whereas "radical originality" is the sign of a "truly great theologian" Brunner was mainly interested in a "contemporary restatement of classical Reformation theology" in between the conservative and liberal extremes.¹⁷ This view of Brunner's theology and approach will be further investigated and defeated below. Whilst being fond of Brunner McGrath identifies several other weaknesses. He

12. The fact that there is no street named after Emil Brunner in Switzerland, yet there is a Karl Barth square in Basel and several streets in Germany that bear the name of the theologian from Basel, illustrates well the lack of Brunner's remembrance. Nonetheless, there is a small University in Florida, USA, keeping his memory alive since it is named after him: *Emil Brunner World University* (www.ebwus.com).

13. McEnhill and Newlands, *Fifty Key Christian Thinkers*, 84. Also cited in Brown, *Believing Thinking*, 6.

14. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 77. Also cited in Brown, *Believing Thinking*, 5.

15. Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 583. He usually emphasizes that he is not a Brunner student (see *Evangelisch-reformiertes Forum*, "Emil Brunner," 0:22).

16. McKim, "Brunner the Ecumenist," 91. Also cited in Brown, *Believing Thinking*, 5.

17. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 85.

mentions three major contributions to Brunner's own eclipse: First, Brunner's lack of exegetical work and therefore shallow engagement with the Bible compared to Barth. Second, that Brunner developed his theology through massive monographs on specific topics in a "not very accessible style." Third, Brunner's tendency to heated dismissal of his opponents, theological categories, and approaches in an often somewhat denigratory and simplistic manner. McGrath concludes: "It is a matter for regret that Brunner seems to have played a significant role in his own decline."¹⁸ Although McGrath emphasizes important aspects, especially with Brunner's lack of explicit exegetical engagement,¹⁹ his style-argument seems superficial since at least for a German-speaking person his writing style is very accessible compared to Barth's.²⁰ McGrath himself quotes Austin Farrer, who has said that Brunner "is Barth with the rhetoric pulled out and thought inserted in its place."²¹ Could it be that it was not mainly Brunner's style but the focus of many of his monographs to be explicitly grounded in a contemporary context that contributed through the years to a perceived loss of relevance of his works?²² However, this nonetheless appears short-sighted since, although written within a certain context in history, many of Emil Brunner's propositions and insights had an almost prophetic dimension to them.²³

All of those perceived weaknesses of Brunner lead us to a sixth possibility: Perhaps Brunner was, at best, simply misunderstood or, at worst, ignored on purpose.

18. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 226–28.

19. Gerhard Gloege condemns Brunner's approach, which often paraphrases instead of showing proper exegesis, as early as 1951 (Gloege, "Gläubiges Denken," 71).

20. Gloege praises Brunner's relaxed writing style as unequaled mastery (Gloege, "Gläubiges Denken," 57). David Cairns means that Brunner's works are "easier to understand . . . and more congenial" than Barth's. He quotes an Anglican theologian who said that Brunner was "more digestible and more reasonable than Barth" and even Barth should have admitted that Brunner has an "uncanny clarity." Cairns, "Theology of Emil Brunner," 306–7.

21. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, x.

22. Gill, "Teacher and Preacher," 320. McKim calls it his "effort to communicate effectively the ancient faith to modern Western society." McKim, "Brunner the Ecu-
menist," 91.

23. See Leiner, *Gottes Gegenwart*, 276; Hans ten Doornkaat's statement in a Swiss radio show (1989, see above).

Misunderstood or Ignored?

As has already been shown in the last section, a considered weakness of Brunner was his being a wanderer between theological worlds. While this is apparent, the explanation that he was simply balancing the extremes²⁴ is superficial and misses Brunner's underlying core concept of *Truth as Encounter* as well as his personality. Hans Heinrich Brunner remembers his father's personality as very competitive, as a fighter in whatever he did, whether it was playing sports with his children or in theological discourse with colleagues.²⁵ He is remembered as someone who, in a general conversation, "quickly strived to reach the point where clear frontiers arose" so that the "argument could begin."²⁶ Towards the end of his life Emil Brunner summarized:

A critical analysis of my own theology has not only been welcome [*sic*] by me—as all my students would certainly testify—but it has also been a necessity for me. I can develop my own thoughts best in answering different or opposing views, and I am of the conviction that the truth, especially the truth of God's word, can be found only by common effort.²⁷

This, "answering different or opposing views," can be observed throughout Brunner's life. For instance, Gloege perceives him as one who was fighting on all kinds of theological and philosophical fronts in order to establish his "basic existential motif."²⁸ Peter Vogelsanger goes further in commenting that Brunner's theology "always tends to aggressiveness, encounter, criticism, dynamic decision" and it aims to "reveal errors, misunderstandings, hiding places" against true faith.²⁹ It is clear, then, that Emil Brunner was never tame nor a thinker merely searching for a middle way between the extremes. He was always a fighter—either for or against something.³⁰ He was passionate and remained so from youth until old age. His son asks rhetorically: "Wouldn't a 'tranquil' [*abgeklärter*]

24. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 85.

25. Brunner, *Mein Vater*, 118–19.

26. Brunner, *Mein Vater*, 275 (TM).

27. Brunner, "Reply to Interpretation," 325.

28. Gloege, "Gläubiges Denken," 63 (TM).

29. Vogelsanger, "Brunner as Apologist," 289.

30. Salakka, *Person und Offenbarung*, 94. See also section 1b.

Emil Brunner have been a contradiction in terms?”³¹ It is safe to claim, therefore, that Brunner needed, in his earlier life, something to fight against and through his theological process, he found something worth fighting for: truth as encounter. Hence, McKim clearly and rightly shows in his study that “Brunner did not set out to be some sort of diplomatic theologian, the reconciler of extremes. He would have repudiated any such description of his work, but that is, in fact, what his writings often did, as he combined the best from various schools in creative synthesis.”³² He demonstrates therefore that Gloege’s label of Brunner’s theology as a problematic mediation-theology (*Vermittlungstheologie*) is wrong.³³ One could note with a wink that Emil Brunner was not very Swiss in this respect, but rather showed an American attitude: to be theologically the “world police.”

Grenz and Olson’s work *20th-Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* can be used as a representative case study for this lack of understanding of Brunner’s leitmotif. The authors appear to highlight Brunner’s concept of I-You relationship:

However, his contribution to contemporary theology has its positive and original side. This contribution begins with his identification of revelation with the “I-Thou Encounter” between the individual and God. . . . Building from his concept of revelation as I-Thou encounter, Brunner’s entire approach to theology has been designated “biblical personalism.” He did indeed elevate this insight, and his attempt to center everything around it stands as his greatest contribution to modern theology.³⁴

However, in reality, the authors pay lip service to this appraisal because they merely and falsely interpret it as a balancing act. Simultaneously, they somehow seem blind to Brunner’s contribution to the declared goal of their volume: a balance between immanence and transcendence.³⁵

31. Brunner, *Mein Vater*, 308 (TM).

32. McKim, “Brunner the Ecumenist,” 104.

33. Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 76. Sadly McKim does not emphasize enough that it was exactly Brunner’s relationship motif that created this synthesis and the perception of balance (see, e.g., McKim, “Brunner the Ecumenist,” 95).

34. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 79–80.

35. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 9–12, 311–15. Interestingly Robert Bertram sees Brunner’s concept of revelation clearly cast “in terms of transcendence-immanence.” Bertram, “Brunner on Revelation,” 641. This tension has many similarities to Brunner’s depiction of objectivism vs. subjectivism (see section 1b) and is also

They miss that Brunner does not only balance the two but introduces a third option of, as they rightly call it, an I-You encounter. Ironically, Grenz and Olson criticize or praise various theologians throughout the book for their specific one-sided contributions, while Brunner would have brought many of those different approaches together uniquely and elegantly. For example, Karl Barth is praised by the authors, on the one hand, for his “recovery of the transcendence of God” and his focus on God’s absolute freedom and, on the other, they critiqued that he “may have sacrificed too much on the human side of the God-world relationship.” Also, they point out that Barth may have landed on the other side of Schleiermacher’s lopsided focus on humankind.³⁶ Yet it was Brunner who went against this “A” of objectivism in Barth’s Neo-Orthodoxy and Schleiermacher’s “B” of subjectivism with his proposed leitmotif “C” of truth as encounter.³⁷

Grenz and Olson show that Bultmann’s existentialist approach erred in a similar way to Schleiermacher in arguing that “theology becomes the reflection on the experience of the encounter that leads to authentic existence.” As such, God somewhat dissolves into the realm of personal faith and loses his ability to work in the world apart from personal relation. The outcome of this injection of transcendence into immanence was the loss of the transcendence.³⁸ The American authors appear ignorant of Brunner’s proposal of an I-You encounter that saves transcendence within the immanence of personal faith while also avoiding a wrong faith-inwardness that lacks any impact on the wider society.³⁹

Strangely, the authors praise Reinhold Niebuhr for his attempt to create a balance between transcendence and immanence but fail to do the same with Emil Brunner or draw attention to the many similarities between the two. They conclude that Niebuhr could keep this balance only at a great cost: “Niebuhr’s proposal worked to remove the activity of God in history—whether past or future—to a realm beyond history. Thereby he left his followers little hope of finding the transcendent God in actual events, whether in salvation history or the consummation of

perceived by others without any reference to Brunner (Duvall and Hays, *Relational Presence*, 7; Fretheim, *God and World*, 23).

36. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 77.

37. Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung*, 86; ETR 84. See section 1b.

38. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 96–98.

39. Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung*, 88–90; ETR 87–88.

history.”⁴⁰ Brunner, on the other hand, did not lose the God who is active within history because this divine action is fundamental and crucial for his concept of personal correspondence.⁴¹

Finally, Grenz and Olson conclude their work: “As the century has drawn to its close, we have been left wondering if any progress has been made. Rather than create a balanced theology, the efforts of the last decades seem only to have increased the tension between immanence and transcendence.”⁴² They further lament that “no single signpost pointing the way forward emerged” and that the “greatest lasting legacy of this century of theology is its recovery of the importance of the transcendence theme.” They close with the vision of a theology of the future that balances divine immanence with divine transcendence.⁴³ One has to admit that Brunner at least has been misunderstood, perhaps even ignored.⁴⁴ This is unfortunate since he not only created a balance without merely balancing extremes but also introduced a basis that has the potential to be built upon for the challenges of twenty-first century theology. Somehow the authors appear to be missing the importance and centrality of this conception and Brunner as its “signpost.”⁴⁵

Another example of misinterpretation of Brunner’s leitmotif is found in Gerhard Gloege’s reception of *Dogmatik I & II* in 1951. Although Gloege’s precision accurately summarizes Brunner’s structure and train of thought throughout the volumes and perceives *Wahrheit als*

40. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 99–112.

41. Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung*, 154–59; ETR 155–58.

42. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 311.

43. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 311–15.

44. Brown makes a similar point with a different example, although she calls it more mildly “instances of overlooking Brunner.” Brown, “Personal Imperative of Revelation,” 422.

45. Interestingly, Roger Olson later wrote several web-articles that show his great appreciation of Brunner (see Olson, “Favorite Theologian Revisted” (two parts); Olson, “Gems of Wisdom”). After being asked about this assumed change of mind in personal email correspondence in November 2017, Olson responded that *20th-Century Theology* was his first book and that he “tended to ‘bow’ to his [Stanley’s] thoughts about theologians.” Whilst he does not recall who wrote the chapter about Brunner, he says that years later he rediscovered “a whole new Brunner” whom he “had forgotten about or overlooked.” Since then, Olson has written *The Journey of Modern Theology* based on and rewritten from *20th-Century Theology*. Sadly, his new chapter on Brunner “got cut in the editorial process.” This supports the point being made in this section of a deliberate, since in this case editorial, annexing of Brunner to the theological hinterland.

Begegnung as the foundation which is now explicated dogmatically,⁴⁶ Gloege misses the meaning of this core concept. Gloege calls it the “basic existential motif” and questions whether it is strong enough to carry Brunner’s dogmatics, pointing out that Brunner has a renewed “synthesis of Pietism and Rationalism” and that everything shows that this leads to an “emotionalizing of thought” (*Emotionalisierung des Denkens*).⁴⁷ This is a strange conclusion given this position is exactly what Brunner fought against and explicitly repudiated.⁴⁸ Gloege goes on to accuse Brunner of a “theology of experience” (*Erfahrungs-Theologie*), where the last “inappealable instance” is the personal experience.⁴⁹ Gloege concludes that the impression given is that Brunner “seems to be able to save himself from oppressive objectivism only by fleeing into the liberating subjectivism of religious experience.”⁵⁰ He even draws parallels between the approaches of Brunner and Troeltsch.⁵¹ The problem with this critique, however, is not its harshness but its focus on Brunner’s subjective experience aspects. Gloege misses the whole point of the concept of personal correspondence, which “blends” objectivity and subjectivity within the leitmotif of relationship. In fact, Gloege appears to have no place for relational categories within theology whatsoever. This basic misinterpretation leads to the misinterpretation of certain dogmatic *topoi* in Brunner, which in return shows that Gloege indeed did not understand the central relational leitmotif.⁵²

These examples from Gloege as well as Grenz and Olson do not stand alone. Brunner bewails the fact that even his own students (as Gloege was) did not understand him correctly and that he had to “swim against the current.” He believed that with *Wahrheit als Begegnung* only a few had “recognized that something like a breakthrough had happened, which assessed, would bring a radical change to the whole of the theological and

46. Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 57.

47. Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 64 (TM).

48. Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung*, 86; ETR 84–85.

49. Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 65 (TM).

50. Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 67 (TM).

51. Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 77.

52. He questions, e.g., in Brunner’s hamartiology its focus on the sinful act instead of the sinful person (Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 69), whereas the same passages seen through Brunner’s relational lens lead to the exact opposite conclusion (see section 4b).