

THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND EMIL BRUNNER'S REJECTION AND  
CRITICISM OF COMMUNISM

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*Introduction*

In the context of North American Christianity, groups and denominations often give the impression that they promote values and issues according to certain party lines. For instance, Robert Benne points out that, “The Rev. Jerry Falwell often connected being Christian with support of the Republican agenda.”<sup>1</sup> Certain groups and denominations vote in strict adherence to a certain party’s political agenda, making it difficult to recognize or differentiate the Christian agenda from the party’s political values. Expounding upon these impressions that Christians often portray, Benne tells us about his own experience at the Lutheran Ethicists’ Conference. He writes,

For example, this intentional fusion was evident in a Lutheran Ethicists’ Conference in which I criticized the tendency of our church’s advocacy offices always to endorse liberal policies. In my paper I asked rhetorically: Do Christian ethical norms always lead to liberal policies? One of the veteran Lutheran ethicists responded to my rhetorical questions by saying: Of course, they do; Christian ethics *always* leads in a ‘progressive’ direction.<sup>2</sup>

The critical weakness of this veteran Lutheran ethicist that Benne describes is that he is extremely uncritical in differentiating progressive political values and beliefs from Christian values and beliefs. The weakness noted here is simply to show how

1. Benne, *Good and Bad Ways*, 33.
2. Benne, *Good and Bad Ways*, 32. Emphasis added.

progressive political values and beliefs can be opposed to Christian values and beliefs. A fusion of Christian beliefs with conservative political values and beliefs has the same weakness. The point of this weakness is the uncritical attitude in differentiating Christian values and beliefs from the political ideologies of our time (whether conservative or progressive). To avoid this sort of weakness, it may be helpful to introduce a theologian who was able to differentiate what he perceived to be true Christian values and beliefs from the political ideologies of his own day.

I. John Hesselink, who knew both Emil Brunner from their time together in Japan, and Karl Barth, who was Hesselink's doctoral supervisor, recounts the story of how he was able to arrange a meeting between these two theological giants towards the end of their respective careers. This was a historic meeting because it was the first time that they met in decades.<sup>3</sup> Both Barth and Brunner were tepid and anxious leading up to this historic encounter. In fact, according to Hesselink, both Barth and Brunner asked Hesselink about what topics of conversation they should avoid in order to ensure that the other party was not put off. Among the topics that were to be avoided during this face-to-face meeting were the dissolution of their theological alliance that occurred with their acrimonious debate on natural theology in 1934 and their political stances on communism. Their differences regarding natural theology meant that this was to be a topic that should not be brought up during their first personal meeting in decades. Communism was another topic to be avoided because of their political differences and their harsh criticisms of one another regarding their conflicting stances toward communism. During his time in the pastorate, Barth was known as the "red" pastor in Safenwil, and his reluctance to criticize communism did not sit well with Brunner. In fact, Hesselink points out that the most recent controversy surrounding Barth and Brunner (in the leadup to their historic meeting) occurred,

as a result of Barth's open letter to an East German pastor which climaxed his seemingly moderate stand in regard to Communism.

3. Hesselink, "The Elephant and the Whale," 6.

Brunner was shocked and labeled this ‘ethical irresponsibility’. Barth, in turn, is appalled by Brunner’s repeated blasts against all those who would try to work out a *modus vivendi* [sic] with the Communists (including the World Council of Churches). *Barth feels that Brunner’s reactions were more capitalist than Christian.*<sup>4</sup>

Regarding Barth’s stance on communism, it should be noted that he found the West’s hostility toward the communism of the East to be unhelpful. He tells us,

I regard anticommunism as a matter of principle an evil even greater than communism itself . . . Further, could we really intend to help the peoples governed by communism and the world threatened by it, or even one individual among those suffering under its effects, by proclaiming and seeking to practice toward it a relationship exclusively that of enemies?<sup>5</sup>

For Barth, communism represented a constructive task. Christians in the West were not to demonize the communists of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, but they were to take seriously the social task that stood before them. In this vein, Barth writes, “I have sharply condemned certain events which have taken place in the Soviet Union, but nevertheless the Soviet Union represents a constructive idea, the solution of a question which for us too is a serious and burning question—the social question.”<sup>6</sup> He concludes that, “We must demand that we in the West tackle the solution of social questions as energetically as is being done in the East.”<sup>7</sup> Brunner had difficulty understanding how Barth could display hesitancy in criticizing the communism of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc.

One commentator points out that Brunner opposed Barth on communism because of the totalitarian nature of communism. In fact, this commentator writes that for Brunner,

If communism is thought of as simply an expression of the desire for social justice, there is no quarrel; it is agreed that there are Christian

4. Hesselink, “The Elephant and the Whale,” 5. Emphasis added.
5. Barth, “Recapitulation Number Three,” 72.
6. Barth, “We are not Against the East,” 152.
7. Barth, “We are not Against the East,” 152.

possibilities in such communism. But *existing* Communism leads logically to totalitarianism. The question for the Christian church, therefore, is not whether it will take a negative stand against ideal communism, but whether it will say No to a total state, which is the only kind consistent with existing Communism.<sup>8</sup>

For Brunner, discussion about communism had to be based on communism as it existed and not in its ideological form.<sup>9</sup> As will be seen later in this article, Brunner opposed communism and criticized Barth's stance because of the totalitarian nature of communism. Despite their significant political differences, it should be pointed out that the meeting between these two great theologians went well on a personal level despite the fact that they did not make progress toward resolving their theological and political differences.

Moving beyond this meeting, it is important to highlight that Brunner consistently remained opposed to totalitarianism and explicitly criticized communism. Hesselink's account of Barth's accusation that Brunner was more capitalist than Christian raises serious questions. Did Brunner's criticism of communism stem from a political motivation that drove his theological maneuvers? Or did Brunner actually have a theological foundation that drove his political thought to reject the tenets of communism, fascism, and totalitarianism? These questions are important to ask because they help us analyze how a certain theologian or theological system applies its beliefs and ideas to situations outside the sphere of the church and in the public arena. Do their theological systems flex, bend, or break as they attempt to address a need in

8. Staff Member, "Barth vs. Brunner," 776.

9. See Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 247. Brunner writes, "Both 'socialism' and 'communism' are notions which can be interpreted in widely different ways, and are at the same time ideal aims to which very different meanings can be given. Many idealistic socialists and communists will rebel against my assertion that communism inevitably leads to totalitarian dictatorship. To justify my view, I can refer to the fact that the only communistic economic system the world has yet known, namely Bolshevism, is actually a dictatorship." When Brunner criticizes communism, he is criticizing communism as it relates to the results of Bolshevism, namely, the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc.

the political sphere? When these questions are understood and answered correctly, one can explain whether or not a theologian's political stance is consistent with the theological foundation and methodology that the theologian established. For this reason, this article will attempt to provide a description of Brunner's theological methodology and theological foundations, especially as they relate to the sphere of politics and economics, with a particular emphasis on his engagement of communism. Of particular importance are the doctrines of general revelation, creation, and how Brunner describes the "ordering" of creation. This article will offer a description of Brunner's political stances. It is my contention that Brunner's criticisms of Communism did not stem from the fact that he unwittingly or uncritically accepted capitalism, but that Brunner's criticisms of communism stemmed from his theological proposals concerning the doctrines of general revelation, creation, and anthropology.

#### *The Doctrine of General Revelation and the Orders of Creation*

With the 1934 debate on natural theology in mind, Brunner wrote, "First of all, we must make a clear distinction between two questions, which unfortunately, are continually being confused with one another: the question of the revelation in Creation, and the question of man's natural knowledge of God."<sup>10</sup> Brunner makes this distinction in order to make his theological proposals in the 1934 debate more clear. Furthermore, he seems to have Barth in his sights when he writes, "Now some theologians believed (mistakenly) that their denial of a '*theologia naturalis*' obliged them also to deny the reality of the revelation in Creation; this was due to their mistaken idea that the acknowledgement of a revelation in Creation must necessarily lead to the recognition of a '*theologia naturalis*.'"<sup>11</sup> Despite Barth's accusations against Brunner affirming natural theology, Brunner rejects a doctrine of natural theology that affirms the idea that the human *possesses* a natural knowledge of God. Instead, what

10. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 132.

11. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 132.

Brunner affirms is that God's creative work in creation contains a reality of revelation.

The difficulty in affirming the reality of revelation in creation is how one can affirm a form of knowledge of God while maintaining a robust understanding of the doctrine of sin. Brunner describes his position and comments that,

Sin not only perverts the will, it also 'obscures' the power of perceiving truth where the knowledge of God is concerned. So where a man supports the view of a reality of a '*theologia naturalis*' in the sense of correct, valid knowledge, he is actually denying the reality of sin, or at least its effect in the sphere of man's knowledge of God. Thus on the one hand, the reality of the revelation in Creation is to be admitted, but, on the other hand, the possibility of a correct and valid knowledge of God is to be contested.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, there really is a revelation of God in creation, but our fallen nature as human beings prevents us from fully grasping this revelation. Brunner puts it best when he writes,

Yet we fools do not perceive Him [God]. We behave ourselves in this God-created world (if one may use the clumsy simile) like dogs in a great art gallery. We see the pictures and yet fail to see them, for if we saw them rightly we would see the Creator too. Our madness, haughtiness, irreverence—in short, our sin, is the reason for our failure to see the Creator in His creation.<sup>13</sup>

What is clear from Brunner's qualified description of *theologia naturalis* or general revelation is that our sin hinders us from knowing God from creation alone. The only manner in which we come to a true understanding of God is when we are encountered by him. Brunner writes,

The God with whom we have to do in faith, is not a Being who has been discussed or 'conceived' (by man); He is not an *Ens*, a 'substance', like the Godhead of metaphysical speculation; He is not an object of thought—even though in a sublimated and abstract form—

12. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 133.

13. Brunner, *Our Faith*, 18.

but the Subject who as 'I' addresses us as 'thou'. God is the Personality who speaks, acts, disclosing to us Himself and His will.<sup>14</sup>

For Brunner, creation does reveal the Creator, but the natural human is unable to see God because the human is consumed by sin. The only true form of the knowledge of God comes when the Triune God addresses us and reveals Himself to us in an I-Thou encounter.

The significance of Brunner's explanation of our knowledge of God cannot be understated. It is Brunner's affirmation of general revelation that allows him to speak about a created *order*. This explanation of created order empowers Brunner to speak Christianly about justice and government in a manner that is understandable and authoritative to those outside the church's boundaries. The emphasis on Brunner's understanding and use of general revelation, however, does not render special revelation in Brunner's thought as unimportant. In fact, Brunner recognized the limitations of general revelation, especially as it relates to apologetics. He writes, "The name 'apologetic' is hampered by the suggestion of a *defence* of Christianity at the bar of Reason even if it does not go so far as to claim rational *proof*."<sup>15</sup> Later, Brunner also tells us that, "Karl Barth's hostility to Apologetics is, however, to this extent justified, because it is true that discussion with non-Christian thought cannot be the basis and the starting-point for dogmatics itself."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the notion of apologetics is tainted with the fact that past theologians have attempted to make Christianity sensible by appealing to general revelation as the bar of reason. This appeal to general revelation as the bar of reason clearly diminished the significance and centrality of special revelation in theology and overestimated the ability of human reason and general revelation in our knowledge of God. For Brunner, this appeal to general revelation as the bar of reason gave general revelation and natural reason a prominence in theology that they did not deserve. For this reason, it should be noted that Brunner understood general revelation as a

14. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 139.

15. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 98.

16. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 101.

mere starting point for a Christian conversation with the non-Christian. This understanding of general revelation did not diminish the role of special revelation, but instead, gave the Christian confidence to take the gospel outside the church's boundaries, knowing that the gospel itself would address and be understood by those outside the church's boundaries. Robin Lovin comments that Brunner "seeks to show that the Word, when we encounter it, comes to us as an answer to puzzles we knew we had but were unable to resolve for ourselves."<sup>17</sup> In other words, Brunner's understanding of general revelation was not one that thought highly of human reason to reflect on general revelation. General revelation was what allowed Christians to take their message to the world knowing that the message would not be alien or irrelevant to those outside the church. This will be looked at in more detail later in the article as we engage Brunner's notion of "eristics." It should be noted that it is Brunner's understanding of general revelation that enabled him to look to the "orders of creation" in his engagement of the political ideologies of his day.

Brunner writes that the "orders of creation" are "most intimately connected with the revelation in creation."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the fact that creation is a reality of revelation means that a certain structure in creation can be recognized. In fact, Brunner continues, "God has given to that which has been created—to *all* that has been created—a certain definite order, which because it has been created by Him, is the expression of His will. The way in which a creature has been made is an expression of the divine will."<sup>19</sup> What creation reveals about God's will is that God's will is structured and ordered. God's will in the act of creating is not chaotic or purposeless. Looking at the natural world, Brunner writes, "What we call the 'laws of nature' are God's orders of creation. This, and this only, is the way in which God has ordered the world. God is a God of order, not of disorder; He

17. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 70.

18. Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 24.

19. Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 24.

works according to law and not in an arbitrary manner.”<sup>20</sup> The natural world functions through laws of nature which are established by God. The laws of nature which are established by God are neither arbitrary nor disorderly. Brunner concludes, “Thus to know something of such forms of life, and such orders, is to know part of God’s creation, and thus of the will of God.”<sup>21</sup> It should also be maintained that it is not only the natural world that is ordered according to God’s will. For Brunner, God has also ordered our social and political arena. John Hart points out that this ordering is important for Brunner’s thought when he writes,

The orders of creation—marriage, family, state—are given by God to provide an ordered framework for God’s basic will for humanity, which is community. Thus, for Brunner, the ‘orders of creation’ connect the divine command to the actual life of real people, provide fundamental ethical content by providing the framework for community, and give the Church a common base from which it can engage society in meaningful moral discussion.<sup>22</sup>

This ordering means that the natural and social order are grounded in God and His will. For this reason, social and political ethics cannot be seen as mere constructs of society, culture, or human institutions. Brunner writes, “Thus the question can never be thus: Are there orders of creation which constitute an ethical standard? But only: What are they? And which orders are *merely* due to human convention?”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the theologian’s task in engaging the public arena is to discern how the orders of creation are ordered according to God’s will.

Although one may understand how the natural world is ordered according to the will of God, explaining how the realm of social ethics or political governance is ordered may be more difficult. Brunner makes it clear that primacy (in how we understand divine order in social ethics) belongs to the individual. Brunner asserts “Hence the primary datum is the individual

20. Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 25.

21. Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 25.

22. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner*, 118.

23. Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 26.

human being. That is the view of things entailed by the Christian belief in creation. The call of God goes to the individual. Only the individual can hear it, only the individual has a conscience, only he is, in the true sense of the word, a responsible person.”<sup>24</sup> Brunner’s understanding of the human has to do with the notion of responsibility. Regardless of whether or not a human being is aware of his or her responsibility to God, the human being never loses his or her standing before God as one who is responsible to God. It is because of the fact that only the individual is responsible to God that, “All institutions exist for the sake of man; man never exists for the sake of institutions.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the human individual is responsible to God. When the individual exists for the sake of institutions, it contradicts the individual’s responsibility to God because the institution becomes what the individual is primarily responsible to. For Brunner, this is a blatant rejection of the created order which is ordered according to the divine will of God.

Brunner’s emphasis on the individual did not mean that he did not recognize the limitations of radical individualism. In fact, Brunner points out that “This individualism, however, at once finds its limitation. The individual is called to fellowship. He is called by love to love.”<sup>26</sup> The human individual is always in fellowship and community. Brunner continues this train of thought and writes that, “Just as every man owes his creaturely existence to the fact that two individuals, a man and a woman, became one, every man, at the root of his existence is part of a community. This community, however, is not the state, but the family. The one community without which human life cannot be imagined in any circumstances is the family.”<sup>27</sup> From the beginning of a person’s life, the individual is called into community. The community that holds the place of primary significance is not the state but the family. For Brunner, the divine order begins with the individual and is connected to the family (and not the state).

24. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 134.

25. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 134.

26. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 135.

27. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 135.

For this reason, Brunner concludes, “Hence the family is the primal community and its rights take *absolute* precedence over the rights of any other natural community, even the state.”<sup>28</sup> For Brunner, the divine order of our social sphere goes from the individual, to the family, and then to larger communities (making its way to the state). To illustrate this, Brunner writes that “As the trunk of a tree grows in concentric circles, with the outermost the last and biggest, human life grows from the individual by way of the narrower to the wider community.”<sup>29</sup> Brunner continues, “The wider the circle, the more impersonal the community becomes, the more abstract, the more remote from the personal meaning of life is its ‘concern.’ Every wider circle is formed because the narrower one is unable to face a definite, urgent task.”<sup>30</sup> The purpose of the illustration of the tree trunk and the concentric circles is that the widest circles merely take care of a distant yet urgent need within the inner circles. Put simply, the rights and freedoms of the individual must be primary with the rights and freedoms of the family following close behind it. According to Brunner’s illustration of the circles, the state’s function is not to control the rights and freedoms of the individual to make their lives better, but the state’s function is to take care of a more distant yet urgent need that the individual, family, or local government could not take care of on its own (e.g., military functions). Brunner’s affirmation of general revelation and the divine order of creation (both in the natural world and in the public sphere) established the theological framework for Brunner’s thunderous rejection of the totalitarian and communist state.

#### *Brunner’s Use of Eristics*

As pointed out earlier, it is clear that while Brunner affirmed general revelation, he also recognized the limitations of general revelation in that there was a tendency in the church to defend the Christian faith as the bar of reason. What Brunner envisioned

28. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 135.

29. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 138.

30. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 138.

was not a defense of the Christian faith as the bar of reason, but to bring a Christian encounter to the non-Christian ideologies. In fact, Alister McGrath points out that for Brunner, “eristics is an activity in which the church enters into dialogue with its cultural context on the basis of its dogmatic foundations.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the church enters into dialogue with the gospel understood on its own terms. Furthermore, this dialogue that McGrath notes was one of “engaging, challenging, and subverting the ideologies of the world.”<sup>32</sup> This can be seen when Brunner writes, “Actually, however, what matters is not ‘defence’ but ‘attack’—the attack, namely, of the Church on the opposing positions of unbelief, superstition, or misleading ideologies.”<sup>33</sup> As people that possess biblical truth and faith given by God, Christians must be on the offensive. Being on the offensive does not necessarily mean that Christians are forced to engage opposing ideologies on alien terms and merely through the use of general revelation. What Brunner maintains is “. . . that every living proclamation of the Biblical message, and indeed the message itself, is full of eristic apologetic elements—is it not indeed an attack upon the self-understanding of the unbelieving ‘natural man?’”<sup>34</sup> The Christian message, understood on its own terms, is itself a form of attack and it is the task of Christians to use this message to explicitly unmask opposing ideologies as forms of unbelief or superstition. The Christian is not completely fulfilling his or her calling merely by proclaiming the truth of the gospel shrouded in Christian jargon with the church as its only audience, but it must allow the proclamation of the gospel to speak to the ideologies of the day. It is because of Brunner’s assertion that the church is not only called to proclaim the truth, but to attack opposing positions that enabled Brunner to criticize both communism and capitalism. It would be a mistake to assume that Brunner’s criticism of communism stemmed from his uncritical approval of capitalism. The fact that God reveals his will in

31. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 67. Emphasis added.

32. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 66.

33. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 98.

34. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 100–101.

creation and the fact that creation is ordered according to the divine will means that Christians can use both general and special revelation to call into question misleading ideologies with confidence that the opponents of the gospel will see their own rebellion against God, who has made his will known through his creation.

*Brunner and Barth on Eristics*

While Barth and Brunner's disagreements regarding natural theology are well-known, Brunner's formulation of eristics is another point of controversy in Barth and Brunner's relationship. David Andrew Gilland writes,

In this regard, it is Brunner's express intention that eristic theology is understood as a *companion* to dogmatics, grounded christologically and therefore presupposing Christian faith. Despite Brunner's nearly endless repetition of these same emphases, Barth was dissatisfied and concerned this formulation would lead to a loss of the theological focus for which they had been fighting.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, despite Brunner grounding eristics christologically and in the presupposition of Christian faith, Barth was dissatisfied with Brunner's proposal because he thought focus on dogmatics would be diminished. Gilland comments that, "For his part, Barth seems to have indicated that critical interaction was clearly necessary for theology, however, as a task within dogmatics proper, not as a separate task . . ." <sup>36</sup> There are certain things to outline in the disagreement between Barth and Brunner. First, it should be noted that their proposals do not *necessarily* contradict or oppose the other viewpoint. Despite the fact that Brunner refers to eristics as the "separate task" of theology, Brunner clearly believed that the dogmatic task itself would fulfill the eristic task. Brunner would agree with Barth that eristics is not a separate task from theology. For Brunner, a complete theology would be full of eristic "offensive" apologetic content.

35. Gilland, *Law and Gospel*, 143.

36. Gilland, *Law and Gospel*, 143.

Furthermore, Barth would agree that theology needed to be in critical interaction with the ideas and spirit of the time. Despite there not being a contradiction or opposition in their views, what their disagreement shows is their real difference in emphasis.

While Barth believed that theology needed to interact critically with the outside, he felt that this needed to be done within dogmatics proper. However, as Brunner perceived it, Barth's understanding of the theological task led to a sort of theology that was tucked away from the issues of the time. In other words, as Brunner saw it, Barth's theology had the tendency to be overly theoretical or objective. It lacked space for the existential or a "point of contact" with the human being. As Brunner saw it, theology done in a Barthian manner moved toward the tendency of becoming irrelevant toward the outside world. For this reason, when Barth expressed his belief that the task of eristics was arrogant, Hart tells us that Brunner responded, "if this is arrogance, what does one call a dogmatics which dares to explain the inner workings of the Trinity?"<sup>37</sup> In other words, the Barthian paradigm for doing theology had the tendency to be overly theoretical and irrelevant to the people of the modern world. What Brunner attempted to address in his use of eristics is pointed out by Hart, who writes, "In keeping dogmatics *existentially* grounded, eristics keeps the Church responsible to its actual life-setting in the modern world. Modern people are existentially, not theoretically oriented."<sup>38</sup> In other words, while Barth and Brunner's ideas concerning the "separate task" of theology are not necessarily in contradiction or opposition, Brunner's use of eristics displays his difference from Barth. Brunner believed that the task of dogmatics has an existential grounding and that this grounding reminds Christians to take the good news to those outside the boundaries of the church knowing that it will be relevant to the issues of the day. This meant that a complete theology would seek to reach unbelievers with the gospel that unmask the false ideologies of the day.

37. Hart, *Barth vs. Brunner*, 107.

38. Hart, *Barth vs. Brunner*, 106.

*Brunner's Criticism of Communism*

In describing the roots of Communism, Brunner writes,

It is true that the fundamental thought of Karl Marx, especially as it comes to light in his utopian eschatology, is at bottom not that of socialism or communism but an anarchic individualism stemming from the philosophy of the Enlightenment. But the part of his thought which was historically influential was not this individualistic utopian eschatology, but the idea of a classless humanity, the idea of a universal condition of humanity, a kind of idea of the Kingdom of God without God.<sup>39</sup>

According to Brunner, the distinctive elements of Marxism (especially in communism) is not its utopian eschatology. Utopian eschatologies simply do not come into existence with the rise of totalitarian regimes. However, Marxism inherits the philosophy of the Enlightenment and possesses as its most distinctive and dangerous elements the ideas of a classless humanity and fervent atheism. Brunner's rejection and criticism of communism can be seen in his attempt to show that these distinctive features of communism run counter to the divine ordering of creation.

Brunner asserts that the uniqueness of communism stems from its desire to create a classless humanity and a kingdom of God without God. In explaining how communism aims to reach its goal of a classless humanity, Brunner writes,

It is true that Marxism, unlike certain more primitive forms of Communism and socialism, does not aim at abolishing private property altogether, but only private property in the means of production. What this means, however, is not merely that economic life becomes a communal concern—which would be the right thing—but a *collective* one. Under this system there would be no individual but only a collective economy, no individual, but only a collective right of disposition, no individual but only collective responsibility.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, when it comes to the means of production, the priority of the individual is replaced by the collective will. Responsibility no longer belongs to the individual, but to the

39. Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 108.

40. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 176–77.

collective. The means of production becomes something owned by the collective. Brunner writes, "The collective is the sole employer, every individual is delivered over to it for good or ill."<sup>41</sup> It is because the calling of the human individual as one responsible to God is replaced with the human individual merely being a functionary or instrument of the collective or the state that Brunner so vehemently opposed Communism. Brunner writes that "The nationalization of all means of production—and this is, in a word, the content of the Marxist program—leads necessarily to the nationalization of man, that is to his total functionalization and consequently to his dehumanization."<sup>42</sup> It is at this point that we see communism's uniqueness in its conception of the kingdom of God without God. Its rampant atheism replaces human responsibility to God with human responsibility to the collective. In fact, Brunner points out that,

according to Marx, the result of a realist philosophy of history is the unmasking of the idea of God as an illusion. There is no Creator, no creation, man owes existence to himself—this is the thesis of Marxism. The Marxist system can be grasped only when it is understood as a Christian dogmatic with a minus sign affixed. The whole system can be deduced from the thesis that God is an allusion.<sup>43</sup>

The whole system of Marxism and communism is built upon the notion that God is merely an illusion. One should therefore not be surprised that in both Marxism and communism, the individual stands accountable to the collective. This, in turn, dehumanizes the human being because it strips away that very thing (i.e., one's accountability to God) that makes every human a human being. This can be seen as a clear confusion and rejection of the divine order laid out in creation.

According to Brunner, "in communistic socialism collective ownership is conversely regarded as the remedy by which alone economic justice can be established."<sup>44</sup> Due to the oppression of the working class, communism is driven by this ideal of equality

41. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 177.

42. Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 358.

43. Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 358.

44. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 176.

by giving control of the means of production to the collective. The individual becomes accountable and responsible to the collective as opposed to God. However, by replacing responsibility to God with responsibility to the collective or the state, communism strips away true fellowship. In other words, the divine order of creation affirms fellowship by recognizing that all individuals are born into families and communities, whereas communism begins with the collective and concludes with the individual. Communism strips fellowship of its importance because all “fellowship,” or relationships, are mediated through the communist government. Who one works with and when one can have vacation are dictated by the state. It is for this reason Brunner points out,

Soon the hitherto enthusiastic socialist or communist was bound to see that together with his ideas and expectation he had been betrayed to a power system which must prove the fundamental contradiction of those ideals. Of fellowship, there was no trace, for there is nothing that more radically denies fellowship than the ‘communist’ totalitarian State, which would far better deserve the name of ‘terroristic State Capitalism’ and which is far more hostile in its opposition to all humanity and fellowship than was the individualistic capitalism of the early nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

The problem of rejecting the divine orders of creation is not only that human beings fail to fulfill their responsibility to God, but that it dehumanizes people. In this instance, Brunner shows how the communist state, by rejecting the divine order in creation, strips away the happiness and harmony of exercising freedom and abiding in true fellowship. For Brunner, communism dehumanizes people by merely instrumentalizing people toward the will of the collective.

#### *Brunner’s Criticism of Capitalism*

This article has so far attempted to show that Brunner’s rejection of communism did not stem from an uncritical acceptance of

45. Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 109.

capitalism, but stemmed from how Brunner understood the doctrine of general revelation and the orders of creation. For this reason, it should not be surprising to find that Brunner has criticisms of capitalism as well. However, before engaging Brunner's criticism of capitalism, it is important to understand how he defines capitalism. He writes,

It is only, however, when economic individualism is allied with political individualism in the radical sense of the term that it can develop its ultimate consequences in the form of capitalism. It demands from the State, firstly, the guarantee of unlimited freedom of trade, commerce and residence. But its main demand is a negative one—non-intervention by the State in the economic process, absolute self-determination of economic activity on the basis of free competition, free exchange, *laisser-faire, laisser-passer*.<sup>46</sup>

For Brunner, capitalism understood in its strictest and in contemporary terms is libertarian. When capitalism is understood in this manner, the government should not intervene in the economic process. While Brunner defines capitalism in a libertarian sense, he does recognize that, "The economic system of modern Europe and America is capitalistic and individualistic, though not, perhaps in the strictest sense of the term."<sup>47</sup> It should be understood that when Brunner criticizes capitalism, as will be seen below, he is criticizing capitalism understood in libertarian terms, or he is criticizing a tendency in the economic systems of modern Europe and America to move in this sort of direction. With this understanding, it is important to review Brunner's criticisms of capitalism.

Brunner points out that "If private ownership had fulfilled the requirements of justice, the demand for public ownership would hardly have arisen. The bias of the working classes to Communism springs from no preference for Communism but from the capitalist *bourgeoisie's* neglect of its duties of justice."<sup>48</sup> The reason that Marxism and communism came to power is not primarily for their ideological reasons. It arose out of the need and

46. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 74.

47. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 75.

48. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 178.

longing of the working class for an economic system that would treat them fairly. In criticizing communism, it should be noted that Brunner understood the bitterness of the working class. For this reason, it is important to point out the specific reasons as to why Brunner found certain aspects of capitalism problematic.

Brunner describes capitalism as “unchecked and unlimited individualism.”<sup>49</sup> Brunner points out that, “On the positive side it asserts that the best economic order comes into being through the absolutely free play of economic forces which unfolds when ownership is private and the economy completely free.”<sup>50</sup> Contrary to his criticisms of communism, Brunner is able to show that there are positive elements inherent in capitalism. This is due to the fact that capitalism maintains the divine order in a stronger manner than communism. The individual maintains his or her freedom and responsibility. This can be seen in the fact that the individual may own private property and do with it as one wishes. However, recognizing some of the benefits of capitalism does not mean that Brunner did not question the system according to theological principles.

Brunner understands the working class’s frustration with the capitalist system. In fact, Brunner writes,

The discontent of the working class with the so-called ‘capitalist’ system is not only, and, properly understood, not primarily, directed against an unjust wage, but against a degrading dependence of the worker’s existence on the will of the ‘capitalist,’ whose sole ownership of the means of production has, till now, given him super power over all conditions of labour.<sup>51</sup>

As society moved into the industrial age, the working class lost its voice and whatever control it had to shape the world around them. This process only became more exacerbated as the divide between the working class and the capitalists widened. According to Brunner, the consequence of this is that,

49. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 175.

50. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 175.

51. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 172–73.

The more anonymous, the more impersonal this dictatorial capitalistic owner becomes, the more degrading becomes their [the workers'] total dependence. The large shareholders of the joint stock enterprise, and even more the board of directors of the syndicate, are unknown to the workers, nor do they know the workers.<sup>52</sup>

The growing chasm between the working class and the capitalist owner only drives further the impulses to dehumanize the "other." From the perspective of the working class, whatever the capitalist owner establishes is merely seen as a form of oppression upon the working class. From the perspective of the capitalist owner, because of the anonymity of the working class, these workers are no longer seen as people, but as mere numbers. Brunner writes, "thereby the worker is reduced to a mere factor in production, to an economic chattel. Quite rightly, he feels this situation to be an outrage upon humanity; it robs him of his place as an organic element in the economic whole; his personal dignity is degraded."<sup>53</sup> It is not only communism that dehumanizes the individual, but the worst elements of capitalism when left unchecked also dehumanizes people by stripping away their personal dignity as a result of displacing them in the economic system.

Brunner made it clear that a rejection of communism and socialism did not mean that we should affirm a capitalism that is left unchecked. Brunner highlights two facts that must be recognized within the order of creation as it relates to capitalism and ownership of property. First, Brunner tells us that in our relation to God, all property belongs to God, while in our relation to other people, we have ownership of property.<sup>54</sup> Secondly, and more relevant to our discussion, is that there should be a recognition of

52. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 173.

53. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 173.

54. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 149. Brunner writes, "What a man has earned belongs to him, he has a right to it. But from the standpoint of the order of creation, a further principle holds good: Even this property which belongs to him does not belong to him unconditionally, since it is held under God. With respect to other men, man is an owner, he has plenary control over what belongs to him. With respect to God he is always a steward, a man with an account to render."

the role that the community plays in the acquisition of property. Brunner writes, "For all property is acquired under conditions which the acquirer has not himself created. He acquires property under the protection of the state, in a civilized world which he has not himself created. Hence the community has a *right* to what he has acquired, since it is a passive factor in the acquisition."<sup>55</sup> What the order of creation reveals is not only that the individual has right to private property, but that the acquisition of property always occurs within a community. Due to the fact that the community passively participates in the acquisition of property, the community has a right to tax property and ensure that it is "up to code." The implications of Brunner's arguments here clearly lay out the frame work to ensure that the capitalist can and should be regulated by the community.<sup>56</sup> Brunner certainly recognized the role of the community in the economic system. This recognition of the role of the community allowed Brunner to give the community authority to rein in the imbalances of a capitalist system. In order to ensure just forms of economic order, Brunner writes, "Humanity, however, suffering under economic injustice, cannot wait until all capitalists deal justly of their own free will. It must use state legislation to compel those to deal justly who do not do so of their own free will."<sup>57</sup> This idea of regulation does not mean that Brunner succumbs to temptations of communism and socialism. Brunner merely affirms regulation, not a nationalization of the means of production. An example of the kind of regulation Brunner proposes would be found in his treatment of monopolies.<sup>58</sup> Also, Brunner makes it clear that regulation should not overburden the property or business of the individual. Brunner asserts, "But however just it may be, and however much it may serve the common welfare that the burdens of the strong should be greater than those of the weak, the community will have to reckon with the fact that there is a

55. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 149–50. Emphasis added.

56. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 179. Brunner points out that "The individualism of unlimited right of disposition over private property results in economic anarchy . . ."

57. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 179–80.

58. See Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 181.

limit to the process, and that to transgress that limit is in turn unjust and disastrous to the vigour of economic life. It is killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.”<sup>59</sup> Regulation should not discourage private businesses, but the government and its regulations should strive to ensure that an order is kept within the economic sphere. This means that it should ensure to limit the power of big businesses without taking away their vitality. Brunner's rejection of socialism and communism did not leave him to uncritically accept capitalism. In fact, Brunner understood the frustrations of the working class and attempted in his work to curb the worst aspects of capitalism. Holding both of these together, Brunner attempted to unmask the weaknesses inherent within communism and capitalism, and proposed a theologically just way forward.

### *Conclusion*

Despite Brunner's prolific literary output, the power of Barth's writing and personality may have something to do with Brunner's somewhat diminished status in theological circles. While Barth's political theology has been taken up by many theologians, Brunner's theologically informed political stances have largely been ignored. Despite the lack of attention that Brunner has received, Charles Kegley points out that in an address delivered by Eugen Gerstenmaier (a former President of the German Bundesrepublik),<sup>60</sup> as Germany was planning their rebuild from the destruction of World War II, Gerstemaier stated,

In Germany . . . he [Brunner] has reached an importance which is unknown to very many people and of which he himself is perhaps only partially aware, . . . in Germany we faced the serious problem letting the foundations of our belief be reduced illicitly or be 'dissolved in the fog of a state-mythology.' Then you (Brunner) came and presented the book on Justice. I can remember the day when I took your manuscript . . . to read it during one evening . . . The morning

59. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 157.

60. While Kegley claims that Gerstenamier was President of the Bundesrepublik, Gerstenmaier served as President of the Bundestag.

appeared when I had finished it, and I knew that I had read about the basis for rebuilding Germany.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the recognition given to Brunner here, it is astonishing just how quickly Brunner's work fell out of favor. Yet, Brunner's rejection of communism clearly shows the different aspects of how Brunner's theology informed his political ideology. The theological foundations to Brunner's politics can be seen in Brunner's affirmation of a qualified doctrine of general revelation. This gives Brunner the confidence to attack and engage the ideologies of his day knowing that people may see the will of God. Furthermore, Brunner believed that a robust doctrine of general revelation allowed him to posit a divine order both in the natural world and in the realm of economics and social ethics. The fact that there is a divine order enabled Brunner to point out that the notions of justice are not mere human conventions established by our social, cultural, and political institutions. The divine order, along with biblical proclamation (which is rooted in special revelation), drove Brunner to challenge the ideologies of his day and unmask the false ideologies for what they were. In this article, we were able to see how Brunner rightly understood communism as a utopia without class distinction, and how it attempts to be a kingdom of God without God. Brunner's criticisms of communism did not stem from his uncritical acceptance of capitalism, but was based on how he understood the divine order in creation. It is because communism rejects the divine order of creation that it dehumanizes individuals and strips away their rights and freedoms. It should be recognized that because of Brunner's prioritization of God's self-revelation that he not only criticized communism, but that he also criticized a libertarian and anarchic form of capitalism. Brunner clearly understood the frustrations of the working class without demonizing the owners of the means of production. Furthermore, Brunner recognized the role of the community in economic transactions. This recognition allowed Brunner to affirm the community's authority and right to regulate the economy. All of this points to the fact that

61. As quoted in Kegley, *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, xiv.

Brunner strenuously worked to ensure that his theological and ethical framework was not fused into the ideologies of his day. This should certainly challenge Christians to reflect as they engage the political sphere. We find in Brunner an honest attempt to provide a theological and politically responsible account of how a just economic order should look.

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