

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

The Last Things and the Last Events^{*}

From Chapter VII, "Eschatology," of the
*Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, Vol. III:
Creation and Redemption* (Nordland Publishing Company:
Belmont, Mass., 1976), pp. 243-265.

"Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5)

I

Eschatology was for a long time a neglected field in modern theology. The arrogant phrase of Ernst Troeltsch— *Das eschatologische Bureau ist meist geschlossen* ["The bureau of eschatology is for the most part closed"]— was distinctively characteristic of the whole liberal tradition, since the Age of the Enlightenment. Nor is this neglect for eschatological issues fully overcome in contemporary thought. In certain quarters eschatology is still regarded as an obsolete relic of the forlorn past. The theme itself is avoided, or it is summarily dismissed as unreal and irrelevant. The modern man is not concerned with the last events. This attitude of neglect was recently reinforced by the rise of theological Existentialism. Now, Existentialism does claim to be itself an eschatological doctrine. But it is a sheer abuse of terms. Eschatology is radically interiorized in its existentialist reinterpretation. It is actually swallowed up in the immediacy of personal decisions. In a sense, modern Existentialism in theology is but a fresh variation on the old Pietistic theme. In the last resort, it amounts to the radical dehistoricization of the Christian faith. Events of history are eclipsed by the

* "The Last Things and the Last Events" originally appeared in *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, edited by C.W. Kegley (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962), pp. 207-224.

events of inner life. The Bible itself is used as a book of parables and patterns. History is no more than a passing frame. Eternity can be encountered and tasted at any time. History is no more a theological problem.

On the other hand, precisely in the last few decades, the basic historicity of the Christian faith has been reassessed and reaffirmed in various trends of contemporary theology. This was a momentous *shift in theological thinking*. Indeed, it was a return to Biblical faith. Of course, no elaborate “philosophy of history” can be found in the Bible. But there is in the Bible a comprehensive vision of history, a perspective of an unfolding time, running from a “beginning” to an “end,” and guided by the sovereign will of God toward the accomplishment of His ultimate purpose. The Christian faith is primarily an obedient witness to the mighty deeds of God in history, which culminated, “in those last days,” in the Advent of Christ and in His redemptive victory. Accordingly, Christian theology should be construed as a “Theology of History.” Christian faith is grounded in events, not in ideas. The Creed itself is a historical witness, a witness to the saving or redemptive events, which are apprehended by faith as God’s mighty deeds.

This recovery of the historic dimension of the Christian faith was bound to bring the eschatological theme into the focus of theological meditation. The Bible and the Creed are both pointing to the future. It has been recently suggested that Greek philosophy was inescapably “in the grip of the past.” The category of the future was quite irrelevant in the Greek version of history. History was conceived as a rotation, with an inevitable return to the initial position, from which a new repetition of events was bound to start again. On the contrary, the Biblical view opens into the future, in which new things are to be disclosed and realized. And an ultimate realization of the divine purpose is anticipated in the future, beyond which no temporal movement can proceed— a state of consummation.

In the witty phrase of von Balthasar, *die Eschatologie ist der “Wetterwinkel” in der Theologie unserer Zeit* [“Eschatology is the ‘eye of the storm’ in, the theology of our time”].¹ Indeed, it is a “subtle knot” in which all lines of theological thinking intersect and are inextricably woven together. Eschatology cannot be discussed as a special topic, as a separate article of belief. It can be understood only in the total perspective of the Christian faith. What is characteristic of contemporary theological thought is precisely the recovery of the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith. All articles of faith have an eschatological connotation. There is no common

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Eschatologie,” *Fragen der Theologie Heute*. Feiner, Trÿtsch, B_ckle, editors (Zürich: Köln, 1958), pp. 493-421.

consensus in the contemporary theology of “the Last Things.” There is rather a sharp conflict of views and opinions. But there is also a new widening of the perspective.

Emil Brunner’s contribution to the current discussion was both provocative and constructive. His theology is a theology of hope and expectation, as it befits one who stands in the Reformed tradition. His theology is inwardly oriented toward “the Last Events.” Yet, at many points, his vision is limited by his general theological presuppositions. Indeed, his theology reflects his personal experience of faith— what he himself calls— *die gläubige Existenz*.

II

The mystery of the Last Things is grounded in the primary paradox of Creation. According to Brunner, the term Creation, in its Biblical use, does not denote the manner in which the world did actually come into existence, but only the sovereign Lordship of God. In the act of Creation God posits something totally other than Himself, “over against” Himself. Accordingly, the world of creatures has its own mode of existence-derivative, subordinate, dependent, and yet genuine and real, in its own kind. Brunner is quite formal

246

at this point. “A world which is not God exists alongside of Him.” Thus, the very existence of the world implies a certain measure of self-imposed “limitation” on the side of God, His *kenosis*, which reaches its climax in the cross of Christ. God, as it were, spares room for the existence of something different. The world has been “called into existence” for a purpose, in order that it manifest the glory of God. The Word is the principle and the ultimate goal of Creation.

Indeed, the very fact of Creation constitutes the basic paradox of the Christian faith, to which all other, mysteries of God can be traced back, or rather in which they are implied. Brunner, however, does not distinguish clearly, at this point, between the very “being” of God and His “will.” Yet, the “being” of God simply cannot be “limited” in any sense. If there is a “limitation,” it can refer only to His “will,” insofar as another “will” has been “called into existence,” a will which could not have existed at all. This basic “contingency” of Creation testifies to the absolute sovereignty of God. On the other hand, the ultimate climax of the creative *kenosis* will be reached only in “the Last Events.” The sting of the paradox, of the *kenosis*, is not in the existence of the world, but in the possibility of Hell. Indeed, the World may be obedient to God, as well as it may be disobedient, and in its obedience it would serve God and manifest His glory. It will be not a “limitation,” but an expansion of God’s majesty. On the contrary, Hell means resistance and estrangement, pure and simple. However, even in the state of revolt and rebellion, the world still belongs to God. It can never escape His Judgment.

God is eternal. This is a negative definition. It simply means that the notion of time cannot be applied to His existence. Indeed, “time” is simply the mode of creaturely existence. Time is given by God. It is not an imperfect or deficient mode of being. There is nothing illusory about time. Temporality is real. Time is really moving on, irreversibly.

247

But it is not just a flux, as it is not a rotation. It is not just a series of indifferent “time-atoms” which could be conceived or postulated as infinite, without any end or limit. It is rather a teleological process, inwardly ordained toward a certain final goal. A *telos* [an end] is implied in the very design of Creation. Accordingly, what takes place in time is significant— significant and real for God Himself. History is not a shadow. Ultimately, history has a “metahistoric” goal. Brunner does not use this term, but he stresses strongly the inherent “finitude” of history. An infinite history, rolling on indefinitely, without destination or end, would have been an empty and meaningless history. The story is bound to have an end, a conclusion, a *katharsis*, a solution. The plot must be disclosed. History has to have an end, at which it is “fulfilled” or “consummated.” It has been originally designed to be “fulfilled.” At the end there will be no history any more. Time will be filled with eternity, as Brunner puts it. Of course, eternity means in this connection simply God. Time has meaning only against the background of eternity, that is— only in the context of the divine design.

Yet, history is not just a disclosure of that primordial and sovereign design. The theme of actual history, of the only real history we know about, is given by the existence of sin. Brunner dismisses the query about the origin of sin. He only stresses its “universality.” Sin, in the biblical sense of the term, is not primarily an ethical category. According to Brunner, it only denotes the need for redemption. Two terms are intrinsically correlative. Now, sin is not a primary phenomenon, but a break, a deviation, a turning away from the beginning. Its essence is apostasy and rebellion. It is this aspect of sin that is emphasized in the biblical story of the Fall. Brunner refuses to regard the Fall as an actual event. He only insists that without the concept of the Fall the basic message of the New Testament, that is— the message of salvation would be absolutely incomprehensible. Yet, one should not inquire into the “when” and “how” of the Fall.

248

The essence of sin can be discerned only in the light of Christ, that is— in the light of redemption. Man, as he can be observed in history, always appears as sinner, unable not to sin. The man of history is always “man in revolt.” Brunner is fully aware of the strength of evil— in the world and in the history of man. He commends the Kantian notion of radical evil. What he has to say about the Satanic sin, as different from man’s sin, about the super-personal Satanic power, is impressive and highly relevant for theological inquiry, as much as all that may inevitably offend and disturb the mind of modern man. But the major question remains still without answer. Has the Fall the character of an event? The logic of Brunner’s own argument

seems to compel us to regard it as event, as a link in the chain of events. Otherwise it would be just a symbol, a working hypothesis, indispensable for interpretative purposes, but unreal. Indeed, the end of history must be regarded, according to Brunner, as “an event,” howsoever mysterious this event will be. “The beginning” also has the character of “event,” as the first link in the chain. Moreover, redemption is obviously “an event” which can be exactly dated—indeed, the crucial event, determinative of all others. In this perspective it seems imperative to regard the Fall as event, in whatever manner it may be visualized or interpreted. In any case, redemption and Fall are intrinsically related to each other, in Brunner’s own interpretation.

Brunner distinguishes clearly between the creatureliness as such and sin. Creatures come from God. Sin comes from an opposite source. Sinfulness is disclosed in events, in sinful acts and actions. Indeed, it is an abuse of power, an abuse of freedom, a perversion of that responsible freedom which has been bestowed upon man in the very act by which he was called into existence. Yet, before the abuse became a habit, it had to have been exercised for the first time. The revolt had to have been started. Such an assumption would be in line with the rest of Brunner’s exposition. Otherwise

249

one lapses into some kind of metaphysical dualism which Brunner himself vigorously denounces. In any case, creatureliness and sinfulness cannot be equated or identified.

Indeed, Brunner is right in suggesting that we must start from the center, that is, with the glad tidings of redemption in Christ. But in Christ we contemplate not only our desperate “existential predicament” as miserable sinners, but, above all, the historical involvement of men in sin. We are moving in the world of events. Only for that reason are we justified in looking forward, to “the Last Events.”

The course of history has been radically challenged by God— at one crucial point. According to Brunner, since the coming of Christ, time itself has been charged, for believers, with a totally new quality— *eine sonst unbekante Entscheidungsqualität* [“an otherwise unknown quality of decision”]. Ever since, believers are confronted with an ultimate alternative, confronted now— in this “historic time.” The choice is radical— between heaven and hell. Any moment of history may become decisive— for those who are bound to make decisions, through Christ’s challenge and revelation. In this sense, according to Brunner, “the earthly time is, for faith, charged with an eternity-tension”— *mit Ewigkeitsspannung geladen*. Men are now inescapably called to decisions, since God has manifested His own decision, in Christ, and in His Cross and Resurrection. Does it mean that “eternal decisions”— that is, decisions “for eternity”— must be made in this “historic time?” By faith— in Jesus Christ, the Mediator— one may, already now, “participate” in eternity. Since Christ, believers dwell already, as it were, in two different dimensions, both inside and outside of the “ordinary” time— *hoc universum tempus, sive saeculum, in quo cedunt morientes succeduntque nascentes* [this universal time, or age, in

which the dying give place to those being born. St. Augustine, *Civ. Dei*, XV.I]. Time has been, as it were, “polarized” by Christ’s Advent. Thus, it seems, time is related now to eternity, that is to God, in a dual manner. On the one hand,

250

time is always intrinsically related to the eternal God, as its Creator: God gives time. On the other hand, time has been, in those last days, radically challenged by God’s direct and immediate intervention, in the person of Jesus Christ. As Brunner says himself, “temporality, existence in time, takes on a new character through its relationship to this event, Jesus Christ, the *eph hapax* of history, the once-for-all quality of His cross and Resurrection, and is newly fashioned in a paradoxical manner that is unintelligible to thinking guided by reason alone”.²

We have reached the crucial point in Brunner’s exposition. His interpretation of human destiny is strictly Christological and Christocentric. Only faith in Christ gives meaning to human existence. This is Brunner’s strong point. But there is an ambiguous docetic accent in his Christology, and it affects grievously his understanding of history. Strangely enough, Brunner himself addresses the same charge to the traditional Christology of the Church, claiming that it never paid enough attention to the historic Jesus. It is a summary charge which we cannot analyze and “refute” just now. What is relevant for our purpose now is that Brunner’s Christology is obviously much more docetic than that of the Catholic tradition. Brunner’s attention to the historical Jesus is utterly ambiguous. According to Brunner, Christ is a historic personality only as man. When He “unveils Himself”— that is, when He discloses His Divinity to those who have the eye of faith— He is no more a historical personality at all. In fact, Christ’s humanity, according to Brunner, is no more than “a disguise.” The true self of Christ is divine. To faith Christ discards His disguise, His “incognito,” to use Brunner’s own phrase. “Where He discloses Himself, history disappears, and the Kingdom of God has begun. And when He unveils Himself, He is no longer an historical personality, but the Son of God, Who is from everlasting to everlasting”.³ This is a startling language, indeed.

Actually, Christ’s humanity is just a means to enter

251

history, or rather— to appear in history. God’s relation to history, and to human reality, is, as it were, no more than tangential, even in the crucial mystery of Incarnation. Actually, Christ’s humanity interests Brunner only as a medium of revelation, of divine self-disclosure. Indeed, according to Brunner, in Christ God has really found a firm footing in humanity. But this does not

² Brunner, *Eternal Hope* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 48.

³ Brunner, *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), p. 346.

seem anything more than that God has now challenged man in his own human element, on his own human ground and level. In order to meet man, God had to descend— to man's own level. This may be understood in a strictly orthodox way. Indeed, this was the favorite thought of the ancient Fathers. But Brunner denies any real interpenetration of divine and human aspects in Christ's person. In fact, they are no more than "aspects." Two elements meet, but there is no real unity. Christ of faith is only divine, even if in a human disguise. His humanity is just a means to enter history, or rather— to appear in history. Is history just a moving screen on which divine "eternity" is to be projected? God had to assume a beggar's robe of man, for otherwise He would be unable to encounter man. There was no real "assumption" of human reality into the personal experience of the Incarnate. The role of Christ's humanity was purely instrumental, a disguise. Basically it is a sheer "Docetism," however much attention may be given to "historic Jesus." After all, "historic Jesus" does not belong, in this interpretation, to the realm of faith.

Real decisions are not made on the plane of history, says Brunner. "For that is the sphere in which men wear masks. For the sake of our "masquerade," that is, for the sake of our sinful mendacity, Christ also, if I may put it like this, has to wear a mask; this is His Incognito".⁴ Now, in the act of faith, man takes away his mask. Then, in response, Christ also discards His mask, His human disguise, and appears in His glory. Faith, according to Brunner, breaks down history. Faith itself is a kind of a "metahistoric" act, which transcends history, or even discards it. Indeed, Brunner

252

stresses the uniqueness of God's redemptive revelation in Christ. For man it only means that the challenge is radical and ultimate. Man is now given a unique opportunity, or occasion, to make his decision, to overcome his own limited humanity, and even his intrinsic temporality— by an act of faith which takes him beyond history, if only in hope and promise, till the final *kairos* [moment] has come. But is human history ultimately just a masquerade? According to Brunner's own emphatic statement, temporality as such is not sinful. Why, then, should divine revelation in Christ discard history? Why should historicity be an obstacle to God's self-revelation, an obstacle that must be radically removed?

In the last resort, the radical change in history— the New Age, released by Christ's Advent— seems to consist only in the new and unprecedented opportunity to take sides. God actually remains as hidden in history as He has been before, or, probably, even more than before, since the ultimate incommensurability of divine revelation with the human masquerade has been made self-evident and conspicuous. God could approach man only in disguise. The actual course of history has not been changed, either by God's intervention, or by man's option. Apart

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 346.

from the decision of faith, history is empty, and still sinful. The intimate texture of actual historic life has not been affected by the redemptive revelation. Nevertheless, a warning has been given: The Lord comes again. This time He is coming as judge, not as Redeemer, although judgment will actually accomplish and stabilize redemption.

By faith we can now discern an “eschatological tension” in the very course of history, although it would be idle and in vain to indulge in any kind of apocalyptic calculations. This tension seems to exist on the human level alone. The eschatological *interim* is the age of decisions— to be taken by men. God’s decision has been already taken.

As a whole, Christian history, according to Brunner, was a sore failure, a history of decay and misunderstanding. This

253

is an old scheme, firmly established in Protestant historiography at least since Gottfried Arnold. The primitive Christian community, the *ecclesia*, was a genuine Messianic community, “the bearer of the new life of eternity and of the powers of the divine world,” as Brunner puts it. But this primitive *ecclesia* did not survive, at least as an historic entity, as an historic factor. Brunner acknowledges partial and provisional “advents” of the Kingdom of God in the course of history. But all these “advents” are sporadic. Where faith is, there is *ecclesia* or Kingdom. But it is hidden, in the continuing “masquerade” of history. Ultimately, the ongoing history is a kind of testing ground, on which men are challenged and their responses are tried and tested. But does the “saving history” still continue? Is God still active in history, after the First Advent— or is history now left, after the great intervention of Christ, to man alone, with that eschatological provision that finally Christ comes again?

Now, history is obviously but a provisional and passing stage in the destiny of man. Man is called to “eternity,” not to “history.” This is why “history” must come to its close, to its end. Yet, indeed, history is also a stage of growth— the wheat and the tares are growing together, and their ultimate discrimination is delayed— till the day of harvest. The tares are growing indeed, rapidly and wildly. But the wheat is growing also. Otherwise there would be no chance for any harvest, except for that of tares. Indeed, history matures not only for judgment, but also for consummation. Moreover, Christ is still active in history. Brunner disregards, or ignores, that component of Christian history. Christian history is, as it were, “atomized,” in his vision. It is just a series of existential acts, performed by men, and, strangely enough, only negative acts, the acts of rebellion and resistance, seem to be integrated and solidarized. But, in fact, *ecclesia* is not just an aggregate of sporadic acts, but a “body,” the body of Christ. Christ is present in the *ecclesia* not only as an object of faith and recognition, but as her Head. He is

254

actually reigning and ruling. This secures the Church's continuity and identity through the ages. In Brunner's conception Christ seems to be outside history, or above it. He did come once, in the past. He is coming again, in the future. Is He really present now, in the present, except through the memory of the past and the hope of the future, and indeed in the "metahistoric" acts of faith?

Creation, according to Brunner, has its own mode of existence. But it is no more than a "medium" of divine revelation. It must be, as it were, transparent for divine light and glory. And this strangely reminds us of the Platonizing gnosis of Origen and his various followers. The whole story is reduced to the dialectics of eternal and temporal. Brunner's own term is "parabolic."

III

The notion of "the end"—of an ultimate end—is a paradoxical notion. An "end" both belongs to the chain or series, and breaks it. It is both "an event" and "the end of all events." It belongs to the dimension of history, and yet it dismisses the whole dimension. The notion of "the beginning"—first and radical—is also a paradoxical notion. As St. Basil has said once, "the beginning of time is not yet time, but precisely the beginning of it" (Hexaem. 1.6). It is both an "instant" and more than that.

Of the future we can speak but in images and parables. This was the language of the Scripture. This imagery cannot be adequately deciphered now, and should not be taken literally. But in no sense should it be simply and bluntly "demythologized." Brunner is formal at this point. The expected *Parousia* of Christ must be regarded as "an event." The character of this event is unimaginable. Better symbols or images can be hardly found than those used in the Bible. "Whatever the form of this event may be, the whole point

255

lies in the fact that it will happen".⁵ The Christian *kerygma* is decisive at this point: "the ultimate redemptive synthesis has the character of an event." In other words, the *Parousia* belongs to the chain of historic "happenings," which it is expected to conclude and to close. "A Christian faith without expectation of the *Parousia* is like a ladder which leads nowhere but ends in the void." At one point, in any case, we can go beyond images: it is Christ that is coming. The *Parousia* is a "return," as much as it is an ultimate novelty. "The Last Events" are centered around the person of Christ.

The end will come "suddenly." And yet it is, in a certain sense, prepared inside of history. As Brunner says, "the history of man disclose radically apocalyptic traits." At this point he indulges

⁵ Brunner, *Eternal Hope*, p. 138.

in metaphysical speculations. “The swing of the pendulum becomes ever faster.” This acceleration of the *tempo* of human life may reach the point at which it can go no further. History may simply explode suddenly. On the other hand, and on the deeper level, disharmonies of human existence are steadily increasing: there is “an everwidening split in the human consciousness.” Of course, these suggestions have no more than a subsidiary or hypothetical value. Brunner tries to commend the paradoxical concept of the end to the modern mind. But they are also characteristic of his own vision of human reality. History is ever ready to explode, it is vexed and overburdened with unresolved tensions. Some years ago a Russian religious philosopher, Vladimir Th. Ern, suggested that human history was a kind of “catastrophical progress,” a steady progression toward an end. Yet the end was to come from above, in a *Parousia*. Accordingly, it was to be more than just a “catastrophe,” or an immanent or internal “judgment”— a disclosure of inherent contradictions or tensions. It was to be an absolute judgment, the Judgment of God.

Now, what is judgment? It is no less “an event” than the *Parousia*. It is an ultimate encounter between the sinful humanity and the Holy God. First of all, it will be an ultimate

256

disclosure or manifestation of the true state of every man and of the whole mankind. Nothing will be left hidden. Thus, judgment will terminate that state of confusion and ambiguity, of inconclusiveness, as Brunner puts it, which has been characteristic of the whole historic stage of human destiny. This implies an ultimate and final “discrimination”— in the light of Christ. It will be an ultimate and final challenge. The will of God must be finally done. The will of God must be ultimately enforced. Otherwise, in the phrase of Brunner, “all talk of responsibility is idle chatter.” Indeed, man is granted freedom, but it is not a freedom of indifference. Man’s freedom is essentially a responsive freedom— a freedom to accept God’s will. “Pure freedom” can be professed only by atheists. “To man is entrusted, of man is expected, merely the echo, the subsequent completion, of a decision which God has already made about him and for him”.⁶ There is but one fair option for man— to obey; there is no real dilemma. Man’s purpose and goal are fixed by God.

All this is perfectly true. Yet, at this very point, the vexing question arises. Will actually all men accept, at the Last Judgment, God’s will? Is there any room for radical and irreversible resistance? Can man’s revolt continue beyond judgment? Can any creaturely being, endowed with freedom, persist in estrangement from God, which has been persistently practiced before, that is— to pursue its own will? Can such a being still “exist”— in the state of revolt and opposition, against the saving will of God, outside God’s saving purpose? Is it possible for man

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 178.

to persevere in rebellion, in spite of the call and challenge of God? Is the Scriptural picture of separation— between the sheep and the goats— the last word about man’s ultimate destiny? What is the ultimate status of creaturely “freedom?” What does it mean that finally the will of God must and will prevail? These are queer and searching questions. But they cannot be avoided. They are not dictated only by speculative curiosity. They are “existen-

257

tial” questions. Indeed, the Last Judgment is an awful mystery, which cannot, and should not, be rationalized, which passes all knowledge and understanding. Yet, it is a mystery of our own existence, which we cannot escape, even if we fail to comprehend or understand it intellectually.

Brunner emphatically dismisses the “terrible theologoumenon” of double predestination, as incompatible with the mind of the Bible. There is no eternal discrimination in God’s creative design. God calls all men to salvation, and for that purpose He calls them into existence. Salvation is the only purpose of God. But the crucial paradox is not yet resolved. The crucial problem is, whether this only purpose of God will be actually accomplished, in all its fullness and comprehensiveness, as it is admitted and postulated in the theory of universal salvation, for which one may allege Scriptural evidence. Brunner rejects the doctrine of the *Apokatastasis*, as a “dangerous heresy.” It is wrong as a doctrine. It implies a wrong security for men— all ways lead ultimately to the same end, there is no real tension, no real danger. And yet, Brunner admits that the doctrine of the forgiving grace, and of the justification by faith, leads logically to the concept of an universal redemption. Can the will of the omnipotent God be really resisted or, as it were, overruled by the obstinacy of feeble creatures? The paradox can be solved only dialectically— in faith. One cannot know God theoretically. One has to trust His love.

It is characteristic that Brunner discusses the whole problem exclusively in the perspective of the divine will. For that reason he misses the very point of the paradox. He simply ignores the human aspect of the problem. Indeed, “eternal damnation” is not inflicted by “the angry God.” God is not the author of Hell. “Damnation” is a self-inflicted penalty, the consequence and the implication of the rebellious opposition to God and to His will. Brunner admits that there is a real possibility of damnation and perdition. It is dangerous and erroneous to ignore that real possibility.

258

But one should hope that it will never be realized. Now, hope itself must be realistic and sober. We are facing the alternative: either, at the Last Judgment, unbelievers and unrepentant sinners are finally moved by the divine challenge, and are “freely” converted— this was the hypothesis of St. Gregory of Nyssa; or their obstinacy is simply overruled by the divine Omnipotence and they are saved by the constraint of the divine mercy and will— without their own free and conscious assent. The second solution implies contradiction, unless we understand “salvation”

in a forensic and formalistic manner. Indeed, criminals may be exonerated in the court of justice, even if they did not repent and persevere in their perversion. They only escape punishment. But we cannot interpret the Last Judgment in this manner. In any case, "salvation" involves conversion, involves an act of faith. It cannot be imposed on anyone. Is the first solution more convincing? Of course, the possibility of a late "conversion"— in "the eleventh hour," or even after— cannot be theoretically ruled out, and the impact of the divine love is infinite. But this chance or possibility of conversion, before the Judgment-Seat of Christ, sitting in glory, cannot be discussed *in abstracto*, as a general case. After all, the question of salvation, as also the decision of faith, is a personal problem, which can be put and faced only in the context of concrete and individual existence. Persons are saved, or perish. And each personal case must be studied individually. The main weakness of Brunner's scheme is in that he always speaks in general terms. He always speaks of the human condition and never of living persons.

The problem of man is for Brunner essentially the problem of sinful condition. He is afraid of all "ontic" categories. Indeed, man is sinner, but he is, first of all, man. It is true, again, that the true stature of genuine manhood has been exhibited only in Christ, who was more than man, and not a man. But in Christ we are given not only forgiveness, but also the power to be, or to become, children of God, that

259

is— to be what we are designed to be. Of course, Brunner admits that believers can be in communion with God even now, in this present life. But then comes death. Does faith, or— actually— one's being *en Christo*, make any difference at this point? Is the communion with Christ, once established by faith (and, indeed, in sacraments), broken by death? Is it true that human life is "a being unto death." Physical death is the limit of physical life. But Brunner speaks of the death of human persons, of the "I." He claims that it is a mystery, an impenetrable mystery, of which rational man cannot know anything at all. But, in fact, the concept of this "personal death" is no more than a metaphysical assumption, derived from certain philosophical presuppositions, and in no way a *datum* of any actual or possible experience, including the experience of faith. "Death" of a person is only in the estrangement from God, but even in this case it does not mean annihilation. In a sense, death means a disintegration of human personality, because man is not designed to be immaterial. The bodily death reduces the integrity of the human person. Man dies, and yet survives— in the expectation of the general end. The ancient doctrine of the Communion of Saints points to the victory of Christ: In Him, through faith (and sacraments), even the dead are alive, and share— in anticipation, but really— the everlasting life. *Communio Sanctorum* is an important eschatological topic. Brunner simply ignores it altogether— surely not by accident but quite consistently. He speaks of the condition of death, not of personal cases. The concept of an immortal soul may be a Platonic accretion, but the notion of an "indestructible person" is an integral part of the Gospel. Indeed,

only in this case there is room for a general or universal judgment, at which all historic persons, of all ages and of all nations, are to appear— not as a confused mass of frail and unprofitable sinners, but as a congregation of responsive and responsible persons, each in his distinctive character, congenital and acquired. Death is a catastrophe. But persons survive, and

260

those *in Christ* are still alive— even in the state of death. The faithful not only hope for life to come, but are already alive, although all are waiting for Resurrection. Brunner, of course, is fully aware of this. In his own phrase, those who believe “will not die into nothingness but into Christ.” Does it mean that those who do not believe “die into nothingness?” And what is “nothingness”— “the outer darkness” (which is probably the case) or actual “nonbeing?”

It is also true that full integrity of personal existence, distorted and reduced by death, will be restored in the general Resurrection. Brunner emphasizes the personal character of the Resurrection. “The New Testament faith knows of no other sort of eternal life except that of the individual persons”.⁷ The flesh will not rise. But some kind of corporeality is implied in the Resurrection. All will rise, because Christ is risen. Now, Resurrection is at once a Resurrection unto life— in Christ, and a Resurrection— to Judgment. Brunner discusses the general Resurrection in the context of faith, forgiveness, and life. But what is the status of those who did not believe, who did not ask for forgiveness, and never knew of the redemptive love of Christ, or probably have obstinately denounced and rejected it as a myth, as a fraud, as a deceit, or as an offense for the autonomous personality ?

And this brings us back again to the paradox of the judgment. Strangely enough, at this point Brunner speaks more as a philosopher than as a theologian, precisely because he tries to avoid metaphysical inquiry, and all problems which have been suppressed reappear in disguise. Brunner puts the question in this way: how can we reconcile divine Omnipotence and human freedom, or— on a deeper level— divine holiness (or justice) and divine mercy and love. It is a strictly metaphysical problem, even if it is discussed on the scriptural basis. The actual theological problem is, on the other hand: what is the existential status of unbelievers— in the sight of God, and in the perspective of the human

261

destiny? The actual problem is existential— the status and destiny of individual persons. For Brunner the problem is obscured by his initial choice— his sweeping bracketing together of all men as sinners, without any real ontic or existential discrimination between the righteous and the unrighteous. Indeed, all are under the judgment, but, obviously, not in the same sense. Brunner himself distinguishes between those who fail being tempted, and those who choose to

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 148.

tempt others and to seduce. He knows of deliberate perversion. But he does not ask, how an individual human person may be affected, in his inner and intimate structure, by deliberate and obstinate perversion, apostasy and “love for evil.” There is a real difference between weakness and wickedness, between frailty and godlessness. Can all sins be forgiven, even the non-avowed and non-repented? Is not forgiveness received only in humility and in faith? In other words, is “condemnation” just a “penalty,” in the forensic sense, or a kind of negative “reward?” Or is it simply a manifestation of what is hidden— or rather quite open and conspicuous in those who have chosen, by an abuse of “freedom,” that wide path which leads into Gehenna.

There is no chapter on Hell in any of Brunner’s books. But Hell is not just a “mythical” figure of speech. Nor is it just a dark prospect, which— one wants to hope— may never be realized. *Horribile dictu*— it is a reality, to which many human beings are even now committed, by their own will, or at least— by their own choice and decision, which may mean, in the last resort, bondage, but is usually mistaken for freedom. “Hell” is an internal state, not a “place.” It is a state of personal disintegration, which is mistaken for self-assertion— with certain reason, since this disintegration is grounded in pride. It is a state of self-confinement, of isolation and alienation, of proud solitude. The state of sin itself is “hellish,” although it may be, by an illusion of selfish imagination, mistaken for “Paradise.” For that reason sinners chose “sin,” the proud attitude, the Promethean pose. One may make of “Hell” an ideal, and pursue it— deliberately

262

and persistently. “*Là où je suis, là est ma volonté libre et là où est ma volonté libre, l’enfer absolu et éternel est en puissance.*” [“Where I am, there is my free will and where my free will is, absolute and eternal hell is possible.”] (Marcel Jouhandeau, *Algèbre des valeurs morales*). Indeed, ultimately, it is but an illusion, an aberration, a violence, and a mistake. But the sting of sin is precisely in the denial of the divinely instituted reality, in the attempt to establish another order or regime, which is, in contrast with the true divine order, a radical disorder, but to which one may give, in selfish exaltation, ultimate preference. Now, sin has been destroyed and abrogated— it can not be said that “sin” has been redeemed, only persons may be redeemed. But it is not enough to acknowledge, by faith, the deed of the divine redemption— one has to be born anew. The whole personality must be cleansed and healed. Forgiveness must be accepted and assessed in freedom. It cannot be imputed— apart from an act of faith and gratitude, an act of love. Paradoxically, nobody can be saved by love divine alone, unless it is responded to by grateful love of human persons. Indeed, there is always an abstract possibility of “repentance” and “conversion” in the course of this earthly or historic life. Can we admit that this possibility continues after death? Brunner will hardly accept the idea of a “Purgatory.” But even in the concept of Purgatory no chance of radical conversion is implied. Purgatory includes but believers, those of good intentions, pledged to Christ, but deficient in growth and achievement. Human personality is made and shaped in this life— at least, it is oriented in this life. The

difficulty of universal salvation is not on the divine side— indeed, God wants every man “to be saved,” not so much, probably, in order that His will should be accomplished and His Holiness secured, as in order that man’s existence may be complete and blessed. Yet, insuperable difficulties may be erected on the creaturely side. After all, is “ultimate resistance” a greater paradox, and a greater offense, than any resistance or revolt, which actually did pervert the whole order of Creation, did handicap the deed of redemption? Only

263

when we commit ourselves to a Docetic view of history and deny the possibility of ultimate decisions in history, in this life, under the pretext that it is temporal, can we evade the paradox of ultimate resistance.

St. Gregory of Nyssa anticipated a kind of universal conversion of souls in the afterlife, when the Truth of God will be revealed and manifested with compelling evidence. Just at that point the limitation of the Hellenic mind is obvious. Evidence seemed to it to be the decisive motive for the will, as if “sin” were merely ignorance. The Hellenic mind had to pass through a long and hard experience of asceticism, of ascetic self-examination and self-control, in order to overcome this intellectualistic na•vet_ and illusion and discover a dark abyss in the fallen soul. Only in St. Maximus the Confessor, after some centuries of ascetic preparation, do we find a new and deepened interpretation of the *Apokatastasis*. Indeed, the order of creation will be fully restored in the last days. But the dead souls will still be insensitive to the very revelation of Light. The Light Divine will shine to all, but those who once have chosen darkness will be still unwilling and unable to enjoy the eternal bliss. They will still cling to the nocturnal darkness of selfishness. They will be unable precisely to enjoy. They will stay “outside”— because union with God, which is the essence of salvation, presupposes and requires the determination of will. Human will is irrational and its motives cannot be rationalized. Even “evidence” may fail to impress and move it.

Eschatology is a realm of antinomies. These antinomies are rooted and grounded in the basic mystery of Creation. How can anything else exist alongside of God, if God is the plenitude of Being? One has attempted to solve the paradox, or rather to escape it, by alleging the motives of Creation, sometimes to such an extent and in such a manner as to compromise the absoluteness and sovereignty of God. Yet, God creates in perfect freedom, *ex mera liberalitate*, that is, without any “sufficient reasons.” Creation is a free gift of

264

unfathomable love. Moreover, man in Creation is granted this mysterious and enigmatic authority of free decision, in which the most enigmatic is not the possibility of failure or resistance, but the very possibility of assent. Is not the will of God of such a dimension that it should be simply obeyed without any real, that is, free and responsible, assent? The mystery is

in the reality of creaturely freedom. Why should it be wanted in the world created and ruled by God, by His infinite wisdom and love? In order to be real, human response must be more than a mere resonance. It must be a personal act, an inward commitment. In any case, the shape of human life— and now we may probably add, the shape and destiny of the cosmos— depends upon the synergism or conflict of the two wills, divine and creaturely. Many things are happening which God abhors— in the world which is His work and His subject. Strangely enough, God respects human freedom, as St. Irenaeus once said, although, in fact, the most conspicuous manifestation of this freedom was revolt and disorder. Are we entitled to expect that finally human disobedience will be disregarded and “dis-respected” by God, and His Holy Will shall be enforced, regardless of any assent? Or it would make a dreadful “masquerade” of human history? What is the meaning of this dreadful story of sin, perversion, and rebellion, if finally everything will be smoothed down and reconciled by the exercise of divine Omnipotence?

Indeed, the existence of Hell, that is, of radical opposition, implies, as it were, some partial “unsuccess” of the creative design. Yet, it was more than just a design, a plan, a pattern. It was the calling to existence, or even “to being,” of living persons. One speaks sometimes of the “divine risk”— *le risque divin*, says Jean Guitton. It is probably a better word than *kenosis*. Indeed, it is a mystery, which cannot be rationalized— it is the primordial mystery of creaturely existence.

Brunner takes the possibility of Hell quite seriously.

265

There is no security of “universal salvation,” although this is, abstractly speaking, still possible— for the omnipotent God of Love. But Brunner still hopes that there will be no Hell. The trouble is that there is Hell already. Its existence does not depend upon divine decision. God never sends anyone to Hell. Hell is made by creatures themselves. It is human creation, outside, as it were, of “the order of creation.”

The Last Judgment remains a mystery.