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A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilisation. Foundations and Specific Problems*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. 2009.

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“In this book I seek to formulate and to justify my conviction that only Christianity is capable of furnishing the basis of a civilization which can rightly be described as human.” This is the main objective advanced by Emil Brunner in the preface of the volume *Christianity and Civilization*. The book was first published in 1948 and aims to demonstrate the fundamental dependence of Western civilization on Christianity. Brunner addresses different issues from a Christian perspective and attempts to show that, even with the atrociousness of the two World Wars, there is a possibility, provided by Christianity, to rebuild civilization.

Brunner appreciates that the point of his investigation is the Christian faith, adding that “by Christian faith we do not mean something indefinite, but the Gospel of the New Testament, as it is understood within the tradition of Reformation Theology.” I consider that, for a better understanding of the approach proposed by this volume, it is useful to mention that Emil Brunner served as a pastor for ten years, until 1924, when he became professor of systematic and practical theology at the University of Zurich.

The volume contains Brunner’s lectures at St. Andrews University, between 1947- 1948. The complexity of the subject makes impossible an analysis that would not be guilty of oversimplification and omission of other aspects or issues. Moreover, Brunner’s approach is also affected by the time limitation of a teaching course. Furthermore, the author accepts on several occasions the blame of oversimplification. Nevertheless, both the theme and the manner of approaching confer novelty to Brunner’s work and render it very actual. These features justify the republication in 2009 by James Clarke & Co..

Christianity and civilization has two main parts, representing two series of conferences. The first series of conferences aims to propose a Christian

philosophy of civilization, whereas the second series offers a Christian interpretation of the essential features of the modern civilized life.

A key feature of the approach presented in this paper is the effort that this important exponent of the neo-orthodox theology made in order to create a *mélange* between the theological discourse and the cultural humanistic one. The subjects covered within the chapters of the first part are the classical philosophical themes: reality, truth, time, purpose of life man in the Universe, justice, freedom, etc.

Brunner is addressing these issues and proposes a theory that could be described as a Christian dialogical anthropology. The Swiss theologian sets out his position as a counterweight to ancient Greek philosophy and to some modern philosophical and scientific conceptions.

Thus, in addressing each of the mentioned issues, Brunner would consider both a philosophical history of the concept and an overview of the modern context, always referred to as being highly problematic and acknowledging only one way out of crisis, provided by the Christian conception.

As we already have mentioned, the view proposed by Brunner is profoundly Christian and dialogical. The strong influence of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue is obvious. Thus, Brunner appreciates the human being as being dependent to the relationship with God, this dependence being a matter of choice and providing the ultimate mark of humanity. Human nature is, therefore, not a disposition, but is the human response to the divine call. The Christian humanist conception succeeds to overcome both the Greek idealistic humanism and the Darwinian naturalistic nihilism by the fact that it presents the man, as created in the image of God and placed within the nature, whereas being above it.

Brunner opposes the description of the Christian conception of man to the Greek idealism with three main points, each based on the polarity between the immanent divine reason and the transcendent divine call in love. First, human dignity is not the appanage of a privileged group, nor it is based on an abstract concept of divine reason in man, but it is intrinsic to the fact that each man is worthy of being called by God in love. By responding to this call, the man becomes free. While the abstract reasoning enables the relation with ideas, with truth, it excludes, at the same time, the relationship with one's neighbors and, hence, it excludes the community. Nevertheless, affirms Brunner, man can not become fully human outside the community. The third level of the opposition concerns the body-soul relationship. Brunner considers that the Christian concept goes, once more, beyond the hierarchical dualistic perspective, because it conceives the wholeness of man as divine creation.

Only the Christian conception is able to avoid the fatal alternatives of the modern man: the individualistic liberalism that defends the human rights, but destroys the community, and the totalitarian collectivism that leads to the total erasure of personality.

As a conclusion of the first part of the book, Brunner warns against the danger of de-Christianization, as the main mark of the recent centuries that leads to the total deletion of genuine humanity and even to its physical annihilation.

Starting from the Christian anthropology shaped in the first part of the volume, Brunner examines various areas of the de-Christianized civilization: technology, art, education, work, and economy etc. Brunner reprobates the excessive belief in progress, for the reason that it entraps the modern man and obliterates the aspect that gives the essence of human life: the relationship with God and with each other.

Not the technology or the science themselves are blamed, but the fact that they are assigned some tasks which they cannot fulfill. Brunner considers that science and technology cannot provide all the answers, but only a part of the truth. The truth about life and meaning of the human existence is not offered by science, but is given to man within his relationship with God. The author believes that, as long as science and technology are not subjects to human will, which in turn is subject to divine will, they are dehumanizing forces.

Brunner does not consider that the institution of the church bears no responsibility for the establishment of the process of de-Christianization; on the contrary, he stresses, in this respect, the role played by dogma, rigid traditionalism, social non-involvement or failure to take position vis-à-vis the technological development.

The ultimate cause of what Brunner describes as the critical crisis of the present civilization is identified within the loss of faith in eternal life. This loss determines the modern man to try to create heaven on earth. Thus, he does not seek anymore the genuine purpose of the earthly life, namely the creation of a human civilization and culture, beyond which is the final destination, the eternal life.

Christianity and Civilization proposes an analysis of the modern civilization, starting from a theological perspective; this analysis does not take place in “the empty space of thought”, but within “the concrete world of history and present day life”. Thus, the Swiss theologian formulates a Christian dialogical anthropology, which underlies the investigation of the crisis of the modern civilization.

The quality, rare among theologians, attributed to Brunner by Martin Buber, namely a “clear and healthy perception”, is also a characteristic of the volume *Christianity and Civilization*. The philosophical survey proposed by Brunner, together with the analysis of the main spheres of the Western civilization and the theological general approach, give Brunner’s work a unique perspective and make his study indispensable for the investigation of the influence of religion on the sphere of human civilization.