

THE MYSTICAL AND THE PERSONAL
IN EMIL BRUNNER AND
BARON VON HÜGEL

by Margaret Lewis Furse

In reading the Neo-Orthodox theologians from the vantage point of the seventies, one cannot escape the impression that the subjectivist trend in Schleiermacher and the outright subjectivism of Feuerbach had impelled their readers to over-react against all forms of "subjectivism." One result is that Neo-Orthodoxy developed its admirably systematic statements of Christian doctrine in a way that all but expunged the mystical, quietistic, and contemplative elements in Christian piety. These elements were regarded as "subjective feelings." Partly this judgment was influenced by Neo-Orthodoxy's dependence on Martin Buber. As is well known, Martin Buber was, at one time, a mystic himself. He was fond of Meister Eckhart, and he wrote a book on mysticism called *Ekstatischen Konfessionen*. His discovery of the theology of "relation," however, marked, to his mind, a conversion away from mystical "absorption." So thorough was his repentance that thereafter he always described the "I-Thou" relationship as a contrast to mysticism. A mystical "feeling," as he described it, is something I possess *inside* myself; it cannot be a *reciprocal*, face-to-face, relationship.

In Neo-Orthodoxy, especially as it is exemplified in Emil Brunner, the "mystical" and the "personal" are treated as antithetical types of religion—the one of immanence, the other of transcendence. Drawing on Buber, Christianity is described as a "personal" faith, by which is meant that man is addressed by the transcendent God in the revelatory word, "thou." This "addressability" is held to constitute man's "personhood." The mystical type of religion is then interpreted as a religion of immanence in which man's task is to develop his inherent potentiality—to become more and more divine as he climbs upward to God on a "ladder of ascent." This traditional mystic "way" is interpreted by Neo-Orthodoxy as a self-aggrandizing encroachment on the sovereignty of God; it seems to belie man's need for grace bestowed from above and unmerited below—the Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*.

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Needless to say, a result of these alignments (mystical with an "impersonal" self-help program; and "personal" with I-Thou encounter) is that the Catholic (and indeed the Protestant sectarian) appreciation for contemplation, prayer, and quietism tends to be excluded systematically. Today, there is evidence of a change of theological perspective on the "mystical" as a subject of critical inquiry and popular interest. There is, for example, an unmistakable popular and theoretical interest in Zen and Vedantism. There is, also, a remarkable willingness on the part of some Christian traditionalists, such as Benedictines, to adopt Eastern meditative techniques.¹ Such changes point to a need to apply theological tools to mysticism; unfortunately, in the recent past, the Neo-Orthodox charge against mysticism as "depersonalizing" has excluded it as a central emphasis in the Protestant form of Christianity. The result is that now, at a time when contemplative values have great popular appeal, we do not have a legacy of deep-going scholarship to draw on—nor even a continuing Catholic-Protestant discussion of contemplative values.

BRUNNER: THE PERSONAL VERSUS THE MYSTICAL

An important anti-mystic among the Neo-Orthodox is Emil Brunner (1889 - 1966). Brunner's antipathy toward mysticism is shown in his critique of Schleiermacher, *Die Mystik und Das Wort*, and in the larger corpus of his theology where he seeks to elucidate the contrast between mysticism on the one hand and I-Thou personalism on the other. Brunner, in his early ministry, was a Swiss pastor. Later, he became a professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at the University of Zurich. His famous "controversy" with Karl Barth, as reflected in their respective articles, "Natur und Gnade" and "Nein!" (1934), turned on an important but technical point: the extent to which each was willing to grant the legitimacy of a "natural" as opposed to a "revealed" theology.

Barth's general position at that time was darkly pessimistic as to what man, unaided by divine grace, can know of God. He rejected any "point of connection" (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) between man as he is in nature, and God. Brunner took a less uncompromising, and in some ways less consistent stand, in which he cautioned against interpreting the *sola gratia* of the Reformation so as "to confuse the absolute receptivity of man in revelation with an objective passivity from which all human activity, as such, could be entirely eliminated. . . . There can be no question of ignoring man, as a human partner in the process of revelation."²

Both Barth and Brunner, however, were concerned to put special stress on the *sola gratia* doctrine of their Protestant heritage, and in doing so they especially stressed the "discontinuity" of any pathway from man upwards to God.

Brunner on Imago Dei. Of chief importance for the treatment of mysticism was the fact that in the zeal of Neo-Orthodoxy to preserve the "personal," it held that mysticism as an example of an *unbroken* upward movement was, therefore, "impersonal." Brunner, while not pressing as far as Barth, still had to interpret *Imago Dei* in such a way as to avoid a simple "continuity" between human nature and divine nature. Though Brunner's own use of "formal" and "material" *Imago* sometimes obscured his aims, his intention was to interpret the *Imago Dei* not in terms of fixed Aristotelian and scholastic thought-forms of form and matter but in terms of a dynamic personal relationship. Man is a "responsive," "answering," "responsible being."³

The perennial theological question was, "Does man lose the *Imago Dei* through sin?" If the answer were "Yes," then the further question arose whether man then also, in sin, lost his humanity and thus his responsibility for his sin; for if man were not fully human in the act or state of sin, how could he, any more than a dog or a cat, be held responsible for it?

If the answer were "No, man does not lose the *Imago Dei* but retains it fully even in sin," then the implication seemed to be that there is deep within human nature an undefiled part, a supernatural element that remains untouched by sin. This answer would imply a rejection of the Reformation doctrine of total depravity, a weakening of the seriousness with which Protestantism views sin, and an open door to mystical immanence.

The traditional grappling with this dilemma both by the Catholic and by the Protestant tradition never quite succeeded in going beyond the Aristotelian substance-attribute context of the problem. It took the form of a quibble about the *extent* of the *Imago's* loss.

The traditional Catholic answer, associated with Irenaeus, involved the distinction between *Imago* and "likeness" or "similitude." Sin is regarded as destroying the "likeness" of God in man but not human nature, the *Imago*, itself. The Reformation tried to solve the problem by saying that the *Imago* itself is destroyed by sin—which is to say that man's humanity is destroyed. Somewhat inconsistently, the Reformers then added that a "relic" or "remnant"⁴ of the *Imago* is preserved like a hollow shell. This shell is just enough to account for man's continuing humanity and to distinguish him from the animals.

Thus Luther specifically rejected the view that "Man is created after the 'similitude' of God. . . ." Those "Divines," he said, who hold to "similitude," assume that it consists in a "perfectness" of man's "mind, memory, and will." Luther objected in typically strenuous language:

Memory, mind, and will, we do most certainly possess; but wholly corrupted, and most miserably weakened; nay, (that I may speak with greater plainness,) utterly leprous, and unclean. If these natural endowments therefore constitute the image of God, it will inevitably follow, that Satan also was created in the image of God. . . . For he has a memory and intellect the most powerful, and a will most obstinate.⁵

Nevertheless, for Luther, total corruption need not mean that man is dehumanized. Man, though totally corrupt, is still a man "even as we still call a leprous man a man. . . ."⁶

Today these conceptions seem quite artificial. An attempt to understand man's sense of responsibility and sense of failure and loss solely in terms of the classical language of substance and attribute appears inadequate. To Brunner's great credit, he tried to reinterpret the *Imago* in the analogy of *relationship* so as to avoid thinking of it as a "thing" to be kept or lost. He held that "we must conceive the idea of *Imago Dei* in a completely personalistic and actual manner, which means that we must do away with the Aristotelian idea of the *animal rationale*."⁷ A concomitant of Brunner's reinterpretation is that it became necessary to say that even in sin man displays his *Imago*. That man is man depends on man's present and continuing relationship with God—and *not* on the quality or moral character of that relationship.

Sin itself is a testimony to the divine origin of man. Even where man revolts against God in titanic rebellion, and with great daring and insolence "gets rid" of Him, or defies himself, even there, behind the human perversion, the Divine image itself looks forth.⁸

Brunner's motive for saying that man's sin is itself an indication of *Imago* is that he wishes to stress that man's very being as man derives from a *personal relationship* with God—which relationship Brunner must therefore hold will always persist even in man's sinful rebellion against God. But there is a remaining problem. If the *Imago* is held to *continue* even in sin—and even to be, as Brunner suggests, especially manifest in sin—will it not appear that sin is a merely superficial disruption of the man-God relation which has no effect on that deeper, more essential personal relationship which *continues* between man and God? If this is true, have we not arrived at that rational continuity and immanence which Brunner everywhere takes such care to renounce?

According to Brunner, however, this continuing "formal" *Imago* does not run the risk of a deification of human nature because it is interpreted as a relationship and not as an endowment.⁹ The latter view "is the gate by which a pantheistic or an idealistic deification of man can enter." According to this view, "man then possesses the divine reason in himself; his spirit is then a 'spark' from the Divine Spirit. He has 'divinity within himself.'"¹⁰ Brunner's whole theology, as well as Barth's, is meant to stem the tide of this sort of Immanentism, which he never tires of warning against. God is not to be "located" within man, either in man's mystical or rational consciousness; nor is man to be absorbed by an engulfing Deity, modeled on the Neoplatonist "One." Man knows God, not by an introspective apprehension of his own essential nature but by entering into a

man-God relationship, characterized as I-Thou encounter, a relationship that preserves face-to-face "over-againstness." To Brunner's mind, only paradox or logical "discontinuity" can express the "personalness" of such a relationship.

Discontinuity of Reason as a Condition of the "Personal." While Brunner makes continual use of paradox and also recognizes the use made of it by forms of mysticism and Idealism, he must on no account admit that his own use and that of mysticism are in any way similar. At several points he implies, rather than fully develops, what the difference is.¹¹ The mystical type of paradox Brunner regards as being used *by* Reason and as being compatible *with* Reason which "wills unity." But the mystics' use of paradox does not, to his mind, indicate the discontinuity that he thinks is required by Revelation. His own use, in contrast, is meant to illustrate the complete inapplicability of the techniques of Reason (and its requirement of the object-subject antithesis) to the subject matter at hand—the personal. In this case his own use is meant to display Reason in a broken state. If, by this use of paradox, he shows Reason to be broken, then we will cease looking to it for the truth. In this sense, despair of Rationality is the "ante-chamber" of faith—and here we recognize the theme of Kierkegaard. Ceasing to look to Reason for the truth, to Brunner, means ceasing to look at *oneself*; for Reason, as autonomous, he always regards as an extension of the self. His own paradoxes are intended to function, then, as sign posts which say, "Dead End, turn another way." In this turning is a decision and the beginning of faith. The paradoxes of mysticism do not, in his view, show Reason in a broken state, but encourage perseverance, rather than turning away. They are like sign posts which say "Poor Visibility, look more carefully."

A basic assumption throughout Brunner's theology is that there are two kinds of truth and that there is a radical difference between the two. The kind of truth in terms of which the Christian Faith can be claimed to be "true," he calls "truth as encounter," or "Biblical truth." In opposition to this is the conception of truth which he believes has dominated the whole of Western philosophy, a conception that divides statements according to the model of "objectivity" or "subjectivity." Brunner makes his division between the two kinds of truth quite radical. Biblical 'truth' is "as different from what otherwise is called truth as this personal encounter . . . is different from the comprehension of facts by means of reasoning."¹² The Christian faith has no claim to the truth, he says, "if science, with the objectivism of its concept of the truth is *the* truth."¹³ The distinguishing feature of truth as encounter is that it is "personal" and that it contrasts absolutely with the traditional view of truth as seeking an object and, therefore, as "impersonal."

This separation of the two kinds of truth implies a radical separation of two kinds of discipline: There is, on the one hand, the discipline of theology, and on the other the interests of the philosopher, the scientist, or the historian. The latter deal with issues on the level of "immanence" and "continuity." That is, they start with man and ask what his problems are and how he can, within his own capabilities, resolve them. The methodology of these disciplines necessarily assumes a "continuity" of reason, the bias of which, according to Brunner, favors a man-centered world and rejects revelation as an irrational "discontinuity." Therefore, says Brunner, we can carry over "no philosophical judgments" into theology. The theologian is concerned with "something *sui generis*, namely, the correlation between the Word of God and faith," and the "nature of this correlation cannot be derived from any general philosophical propositions . . . even those of existential philosophy . . ." ¹⁴ Theology deals systematically with the divine revelation of the Bible; Christian philosophy is the reflection of the believing Christian about being and about existing realities disclosed in experience.

Nevertheless, there can be a Christian philosophy, Brunner admits (and in this he most clearly distinguishes himself from Karl Barth), *provided* the limitations of reason are acknowledged at the beginning. A Christian philosophy would be a philosophy freed of "the illusory prejudice of autonomy."¹⁵ And here, as elsewhere in his theology, he shows a certain affinity for Kantian critical philosophy.

One of the disputed benefits of the radical division of labor is that theology is apparently exempt from the onslaughts of historical, scientific, or philosophical inquiry. There is, however, some equivocation in Brunner on this point. He often says that the Christian Faith must always be vulnerable to these disciplines, since it is concerned with "brute fact,"¹⁶ which is open to non-theological scrutiny. He is quite clear, however, that the believer's faith is not delivered to him by these disciplines nor jeopardized by them, but "comes" rather by a revelatory intrusion that represents, from the standpoint of such disciplines, a "discontinuity" of their method.

Freedom of inquiry appears to be one of the real benefits (and perhaps a motivating idea) in Brunner's distinction between truth as Encounter, and truth as employed by science and philosophical inquiry; and Brunner is surely a man whose liberal spirit showed in everything he wrote. Nevertheless, this freedom is won at some risk, specifically at the risk of making the Christian Faith an exclusive enclave of believers who talk to one another in their special language, theology. Freedom to inquire is so easily granted and embarked on precisely because an "inquiry" can never really reach the essentials of the Christian Faith, which Brunner regards as an altogether different sphere, that of Encounter. Brunner's attitude

toward Kant is instructive here. Religion within the limits of pure reason appears to Brunner to be an impossibility, but one of the things Brunner apparently accepts from Kant is the hard line between reason and faith. He is thus left to establish religion within the limits of pure revelation, whose rational expression can then only take the form of paradox, displaying reason in its broken state.

According to Brunner it is precisely the irrationality, or more exactly, the "discontinuity," that expresses the personal nature of Encounter. This theme is particularly evident in his view of Christology in *The Mediator*. In this book Brunner is insistent on the logical absurdity and rational discontinuity of Revelation because only by way of this discontinuity can the *personal* character of the relationship find expression.

We must have rational clarity and simplicity or paradox! ... It would not be a divine revelation at all if it could be grasped by the mind, if it could be "perceived." ... Revelation ... cannot be anything other than illogical, since it breaks through the continuity of the human and natural sphere in general.¹⁷

It is obvious that Brunner would (and did) vigorously oppose the Liberal theological tradition on the grounds that it assumed that by employing the humanistic methods of the historian, it could simply discover the Christ of faith by looking into the sources. The Liberal tradition never, to Brunner's mind, achieved what he himself meant by a "personal" relationship because it never abandoned its hope of finding God in "continuity" with a program initiated and fulfilled by the self.

Discontinuity in Ethics as a Condition of the "Personal." Because Kant recognized the challenge of the present moment and crisis of decision in a way that Hegelian Idealism, for example, with its long-term view, could not, Brunner characterized the ethical theories of Kant as a promising starting point. "Decision," he said, was "a flying leap, rather than a gliding motion." Brunner looks to decision as a moment in which the breach of rational continuity occurs. Ultimately, however, Brunner quarrels with Kant's efforts to establish ethical autonomy on the basis of a rational universal principle instead of on the basis of an irrational revelatory intrusion into the whole cloth of reason. Alas, Kant was a philosopher and not a Neo-Orthodox theologian! Brunner also found a difficulty in Kant's principle of autonomy—the fact that it is "I" who command myself: If one takes the identity of Law-giver and Self seriously, then the inmost part of the will becomes deified, so Brunner fears, and evil is assigned to the non-intelligible, empirical self, and man's sinfulness loses its seriousness.¹⁸

Generally, with respect to ethics, Brunner accepts from Kant two emphases. He accepts the formalism which would relieve him of a heteronomous prescription of the contents of the ethical command. He also accepts

the importance of the moral command; at least, it is the sense of obligation and obedience and of decision in the face of this command that is stressed in Brunner. What he rejects is the attempt on the part of Kant to justify the ethical command by virtue of its immanent universality (rational continuity). But if Brunner is to accept the Kantian formalism *without* its universal rational justification, he can do so only by especially stressing the *irrationality* or discontinuity of the command. Such a command must be *addressed* to the believer in the "Word." As such it breaks in upon him and can never, on the basis of any immanent rational principle, be predicted by him.

Such a command cannot be known beforehand or else instead of a command there will be a regulation.¹⁹ If, however, there can be no principle by which one can know beforehand what the will of God is, then is it not implied that one receives it more or less spontaneously and *directly* (i.e., immediately) in present time? While Brunner wishes to avoid such a conclusion, at several points he seems to suggest that the *unprincipled* nature of the command is the condition of its authenticity:

Hence I cannot know beforehand the content of the Command as I can know that of the Law. I can only receive it afresh each time through the voice of the Spirit.²⁰

As there can be no preconceived "principle" of Christian ethics, neither can there be a motive for love of neighbor. Only the love which is without a reason is real love; otherwise it is not a love of the person but a love of an idea.²¹ "The man who loves without conditions . . . does not allow his attitude to be determined by the attitude of the other. . . . he no longer loves him *'for something,'* but simply because he is his fellow man, not because he is a man of a certain kind, but simply because he exists. That is what it means to love our neighbor." It is the "unrestricted recognition of the other man, without considering what he is like. . . ."²²

At times the unmotivated nature of love is stressed to the point of depriving the community of a way of discriminating and assessing priorities for service. "Your neighbor is the person who meets you. In the 'Calling' your neighbor is given to you; you do not need to hunt for him, therefore you do not need to search for the sphere of service. It is not for us to choose the tasks which God has thought out and destined for us."²³

Nor is it permissible for a moral evaluation of the neighbor to be allowed to be a motive. Whether he is possessed of a righteous or unrighteous will should not have the least effect on love. If love took into consideration such moral facts as these, it would lose its innocent, unmotivated character. This character can only be maintained by "the irrational nature of love."²⁴

We can see that no *reason*, no motive for love can be tolerated—not even the motive of another's moral excellence and loveliness. For to love out of consideration for moral excellence is still to have a *motive* and means that an *idea* or *thing* is what is loved rather than the person himself.

Brunner: The Personal Versus the Mystical. When we ask what conditions Brunner requires in order to establish the "personal," we may summarize them with the two phrases *rational discontinuity* (expressed as paradox) and *ethical discontinuity* (expressed as decision and unmotivated love). Brunner is vigorous and impressively earnest in proclaiming that the Christian faith *alone* fulfills these requirements and that other religions and philosophies which assume an unbroken line of continuity cannot do so. Ultimately, there are, for Brunner, only two ways of relating to God: either the way of mysticism or the way of faith.²⁵ This contrast is as fundamental as the contrast between the truth of the subject-object antithesis and truth as encounter, and has the effect of putting into the same category with mysticism an astonishing variety²⁶ of religions and philosophies and of opposing them all to the Christian faith, which alone can establish a relation of Encounter.

He contends that mysticism, moralism, and speculation are all basically alike in rejecting the "discontinuity" of revelation. The three form a single type of "universal religion" to which he opposes the Christian Faith as alone "personal" and non-mystical. Mysticism and speculation have in common the conviction that the divine lies at the basis of man's soul as an inmost kernel of his being, and that what is required is only a turning inwards and descent into man's own being. Mysticism and speculation differ only in nonessential ways, only in terms of the method (whether ratiocination or the techniques of prayer). ". . . In both instances it is the self-movement of man whose aim is God, whether it be through the soaring of thought or the introversion of the mystic. Both are in sharp contrast to the Christian faith, where the movement is on the side of God, and the aim is man."²⁷ Brunner puts forward this view especially in *Die Mystik und Das Wort*, where he argues that the very subjectivity of religion—making it identifiable with feeling and with consciousness—stems from a speculative interest in locating the *essence* of Religion—an ideal of the Enlightenment.

Brunner also places mysticism in the same camp with moralism. Here the "path" to be traveled is not of thought or prayer but of action. "Religious moralism is the self-assertion of the 'good man' who believes that by his own efforts he can be pleasing to God; mysticism is the withdrawal to the deepest self which is identical with the divine being. In neither process is there unconditional surrender of faith."²⁸ Both moralism and mysticism, as Brunner sees them, assert "the continuity of human existence with the divine or with the absolute."²⁹

What is necessary to establish the personal is, then, a breach of continuity.

The continuity of thought must . . . be broken through. . . . So long as men believe that it is possible to know God apart from any special revelation, . . . they believe that He can be known in continuity with themselves (subjective Immanence); He is therefore regarded

as a force which is continuous with the world (objective Immanence), as a mere Idea, not as a personality.³⁰

Mysticism, moralism, and speculation—each attempts in its own way to traverse an unbroken “way” to God. And such an attempt, for Brunner, can never succeed in finding a *personal* God, who is not “found” but “encountered.”

Thus Brunner’s whole theology can be viewed as an elucidation of the contrast he would make between a mystical type of religion on the one hand and the Christian faith on the other. In Brunner’s theology, we have an entirely *systematic* rejection of mysticism on the grounds that it is “impersonal.” Brunner’s type of theology has left Protestantism in a much weakened position for a critical appreciation of mysticism, for the reason that Brunner regards it as an impersonal *type* of religion to which he counterposes Christian faith as “personal.” It is plain that his premises entail the utter rejection of any “Christian mysticism.” What is not so plain and needs critical scrutiny is whether Brunner altogether avoids unmediated knowing simply by his reliance on a rational discontinuity like paradox. Some critical suggestions are made below in the final section, “Brunner in the Light of Von Hügel.”

VON HÜGEL: THE PERSONAL AND THE MYSTICAL

We would do well to restudy the relationship between the “personal” and the “mystical” to see if they are, indeed, so antithetical as Neo-Orthodoxy regards them. A promising starting point would be the work of the English Catholic lay-theologian, Baron von Hügel (1852-1925), whose major work, a study of St. Catherine of Genoa, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, had as its chief theme the relationship of the “personal” and the “mystical.” Von Hügel submitted himself and all that he wrote to the Roman Catholic Church, but he was a “liberal” Catholic of his time and, in accord with Catholic Modernism, thought the hierarchy of his day failed to appreciate the work of Biblical scholarship and in its doctrinal formulations compromised its results. Von Hügel had an international acquaintance and correspondence with leading religious thinkers, both Catholic and Protestant, and was a special friend and adviser of Evelyn Underhill. His primary interest was to give a responsible reinterpretation of the mystical tradition in Christianity; and above all he stressed the need to understand the mystics’ “One” more in the analogy of an integrated “personality” than as a Neoplatonist and Pseudo-Dionysian abstraction.

Both Baron von Hügel and Emil Brunner regard the Christian Faith as a religion which preeminently emphasizes the value of the “person” or “personality.” While von Hügel and Brunner have different ways of describing the “personal,” each is clear that the Christian Faith, if it is to be consistent with its character, cannot be promulgated in any form which

“depersonalizes” the relationship between man and God. Both von Hügel and Brunner are wary of losing transcendence in the subjectivism of mystical feeling, but von Hügel thinks that transcendence can be safeguarded by reinterpreting mysticism so as to minimize its excesses.

Mysticism as a Complex and not a Type. Von Hügel holds that mysticism is a doctrine and a phenomenon with a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. He does not favor mysticism in its undiluted, or as he says somewhat confusingly, “pure” (i.e., “false”) form—which is to say a mysticism uncorrected of such aberrations as fanaticism and over-zealous asceticism. In von Hügel’s diagnosis of what is wrong with mysticism, he focuses on its overly geometric view of “unity.” Mysticism is, among other things, a prayerful impulse toward unity, but von Hügel wishes to reinterpret the view of unity inherited from Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. Too often, in the hands of the mystics, the Plotinian “One” as the end of their contemplative quest became a simple blank circle beyond all distinctions whatever. But as von Hügel, the realist, was fond of saying, life “here below” requires distinctions—moral ones and theoretical ones. When the view of unity is too simple, then man’s spirituality can be kept “pure” only by placing his this-worldly interests outside the circumference of the circle, the One. Unity should be reinterpreted as a “unity-in-diversity.”

Von Hügel is famous for his description of three elements of religious life which, he says, must be brought into unity without negating the special contribution of each. The first “element” is the external, authoritative, factual, historical, and institutional side of religion.³¹ This side accepts facts unreflectively and innocently like a child. The second, the rational, reflective, philosophical side, is to be compared to the questioning of the youth, wherein accepted facts come to be replaced by a reflective scrutiny of them. The third, the emotive-intuitive element, is likened to the emotional-volitional-experimental side of the mature man. Here religion is “loved and lived rather than analyzed.” These three elements he also compares to three emphases in the Church’s institutional life: The parties—High Church, Broad Church, and Evangelical are roughly representative, in their respective emphases, of the institutional, the philosophical, and the emotive elements. Among Roman Catholic orders, the identifications are: Jesuits, authoritative; Dominicans, speculative; and Franciscans, emotive.³²

While he speaks of these as disparate “elements,” at the same time he asserts that each is always accompanied by some amount of the other two. Religion is, then, in von Hügel’s view, always a combination of these, and it is the *person* who both achieves and is granted the grace of their unification into a living whole. Their harmonization is one of living forces and is, therefore, never fully finished in the same way that a harmony of thing-like elements could be finished.

The "mystical element" of religion is not to be understood as simply one of these three elements, but rather as an overall urge to unify diverse influences such as these. An aberrant tendency of mysticism is that it seeks to unify them too simply by settling on one and disregarding others, thereby escaping what von Hügel thought of as a healthy "friction." The mystic may fix on some institutional practice such as the sacrament or on some philosophical idea like Being, or he may, and often in mystical lyricism does, focus on the emotional satisfactions of the contemplative life. If, however, the mystic achieves his "unity" by avoiding all mixture of forces, he does not achieve the "unity-in-diversity" von Hügel has in mind. What von Hügel is constantly seeking to describe throughout his writing is a mysticism which is given full warrant to unify, but which is restrained from a simplistic solution which would shut out diverse experiential data to be unified. In his spiritual counsel and letters, the practical application of these ideas was that he often advised his correspondents to pursue some purely *secular* interest. The secular has an importance for the religious; one is not more "religious" simply by attending more and more to religion as a special subject or activity. Von Hügel, in fact, had worked out rather thoroughly the theme that Bonhoeffer had time to treat only fragmentarily.

The Personal as the Analogue of Unity. The theme of much of von Hügel's writing, and especially of *The Mystical Element of Religion*, is that in the person or personality one can find the kind of unity which is necessary to harmonize diverse elements. Human personality is precisely a "living" rather than a geometric unity, and it can sustain conflicting elements with some cost, pain, or tension, but never, except in the fanatic, with so much tension that the unity is destroyed. It is in sustaining this living unity and bearing the tensions which this necessitates that the incipient person grows to be even more of a "person" and grows toward an approximation of the perfect personality exemplified only in God.

Regrettably, von Hügel never gave a complete theoretical description of what he meant by "person," "personal," and "personality"—terms which he used loosely—and today's reader needs to be tolerant of the fact that he wrote before the insights of depth psychology and current personality theories. The data on which he based his judgments were the mystical experiences and commentaries of St. Catherine of Genoa, who, to von Hügel's mind, united within her personality a strong mystical *attrait* and a remarkable ability to see it in a critical light.

Acceptance of Continuity. Since von Hügel sees unity through the analogy of growth, he also views the relationship of nature to supernature as that of a continuum. "Nature draws us to God, as the dim, though most real background and groundwork of our existence; and Supernature raises

this semi-conscious affinity to an active hunger for direct and clear vision, for a true participation in the Supernatural Life of God."³³ He, accordingly, would renounce the idea of the total corruption of human nature; and he warns against interpreting Christianity so Christocentrically as to deprive it of "dim apprehension, formless recollection, pictureless emotion, and the sense of the Hiddenness and Transcendence of the very God, Who is Immanent and Self-Revealing, in various degrees and ways, in every place and time."³⁴

As a consequence of this "gradualism," von Hügel never takes discontinuity—the sudden, the miraculous or abnormal—as, in itself, indicative of the supernatural. The spiritual life "even in its fullest Christian developments" is "essentially not miraculous but supernatural." He therefore assumes it is possible to discover certain "laws"³⁵ by which one can grow in the spiritual life—an assumption that lends his writing the air of authority of one who counsels others out of his own experience with spiritual questing. Much of von Hügel's writing took a form which would seem patronizing today—that of spiritual advice-giving to friends and correspondents. Of this style, the best known examples are his collection called *Letters of Baron von Hügel to a Niece* and his two volume series, *Essays and Addresses*.

Transcendence and Immediately Experienced Certitude. Von Hügel's epistemology is not worked out systematically but practically. He adopts the position that the test of reality is an immediate authentication in which every presentment of sense is accompanied by a "trans-subjective pressure" which has the effect of certifying, as valid and objective, what is given. Von Hügel justifies this view on the grounds that skeptical critics of it also have to invoke surreptitiously "an immediately experienced certitude."³⁶

It has been said with some truth that, although a Catholic, von Hügel was not a close student of St. Thomas Aquinas. With doubtful accuracy, it is also said that the interest he did have in Aquinas was stirred up by the Protestant, Ernst Troeltsch, whose scholarship von Hügel greatly admired. The logical niceties of Thomism were not a special feature of his writing, which aimed rather at theorizing in order to deal with the practicalities met by those engaged in a spiritual quest. He assumed that his hearers were a sympathetic audience before whom he need not defend his views but only explain them. He explained them, however, with exhaustive thoroughness and with admirable intellectual rigor. Von Hügel was not a Thomist and the reason is not difficult to discover. For Thomas the intellect must begin with sensory data. The intellect can know God only indirectly and predicate the "names" of God only analogically. ". . . our intellect, taking the origin of its knowledge from the senses, does not transcend the mode which is found in sensible things. . . ." ". . . we cannot grasp what God is, but only what He is not and how other things are related to Him. . . ." ³⁷ For von

Hügel negative predication implies some positive, direct, though “confused knowledge (I should prefer, with modern writers, to call it experience) of God’s existence and nature [which is] possessed by the human soul, independently of its reasoning from the data of sense.”³⁸

Von Hügel is happy to find in Thomas even a suggestion of direct knowledge of God even though the weight of Thomism is on the side of knowledge derived, analogically, from sensory experience:

St. Thomas’s admissions are especially striking, as he usually elaborates a position which ignores, and would logically exclude, such “confused knowledge.” In his *Exposition and Questions on the Book of Boetius on the Trinity*, after arguments to show that we know indeed *that* God is, but not *what* He is,—at most only what He is not, he says: “We should recognize, however, that it is impossible, with regard to anything, to know whether it exists, unless, in some way or other, we know *what* it is, either with a perfect or with confused knowledge. . . . Hence also with regard to God,—we could not know whether He exists, unless we somehow knew *what* He is, even though in a confused manner.”³⁹

It is evident that von Hügel thought that the usual Thomistic bifurcation between knowing *that* and knowing *what* needed to be modified in order to allow for an immediacy of knowing “though in a confused manner.”

Thus that which needs to replace clarity as a criterion is “confused knowledge” or, to put it more acceptably for von Hügel, “vivid experience” of a “rich” reality. Immediacy of knowing, far from imprisoning one within a subjective cell, opens the self to the transcendently real. All knowledge is a process which includes knowledge of both the Object and the Subject. “We do not know the Thing-in-itself, in the sense that we know nothing exhaustively, and that we do not, of course, know the Thing as outside our knowledge of it. But we *do* know the Thing in our knowledge of it, and we there know it without further mediation.”⁴⁰

Thus there are two benefits of replacing a spatially conceived unity with a personal unity. First, “person” can be understood in such a way that the immediacy of God “within” the person need not imply mere subjectivity. Nor need it imply that the “immediacy” is that of a simple identification. Second, the discontinuity of reason need not be taken as the only means of expressing the mystery of God. Mystery will not be a void but the obscurity of Reality.

Ethics. In ethics the reinterpretation of unity that von Hügel recommends has three major effects. First, a unity-in-diversity will allow and encourage a variety of interests and ends. While there may be a tension between this-worldly and that-worldly ends, this tension need not become the destructive conflict it would necessarily become if these ends were regarded as in competition for “space” within a unity. Cultural, social, and moral activities not directly “religious” in nature may be accorded a positive usefulness to the religious life itself.

Second, for this reason, there need be no conflict between "person" and "thing." If "person" is understood as a unity-in-diversity, then that which is "personal" cannot be defined in such a way that it contrasts absolutely with "things." The practical effect of this conception is that seemingly "im-personal" things—creeds, historical facts, institutions, as well as secular interests—are indeed found to be among the elements which constitute personal unity. In von Hügel's view, the "person" would therefore be imperiled if there were an attempt to do away with these necessary "externals," the "thing-element" in religion.

Third, reinterpreting the concept of unity helps solve problems which become acute in what von Hügel calls "False" mysticism: First, with a spatial concept of unity, the problem of passivity and activity is especially acute because the action of man and the action of God are likely to be regarded as two forces in competition. Such a competition is not necessary if the action of God were conceived as "operating in and through and with our own." The other problem is that False mysticism is likely to interpret the "purity" of "Pure Love" as a spatial unity from which other elements, even those of ethical discrimination, must be excluded. In this respect the "purity" of love is made to depend on its rational discontinuity and disinterestedness. With the revised concept of unity, "purity" need not exclude rational discrimination or secondary motives.

The Personal and the Mystical. Personality, then, at its best and when most developed, has an apprehension of the eternal and simultaneous *while* it is engaged in its contact with the wide variety of external "things" furnished it by actual living. Indeed, to regard total disengagement as necessary was a mistake of "false" or uncritical mysticism, whose concept of unity made it possible to see the eternal only as excluding externals. Its asceticism constituted an impoverishment of the personality, which is, in fact, enriched rather than impoverished by the stimulus of externals. Nevertheless, such contact should not be a simple busy occupation with externals, even in corrected, critical mysticism, but rather "action" instead of "activity." *This* requires an appropriate kind of asceticism—one which acknowledges that *some* pain and suffering is an inevitable accompaniment of growth, but which would on no account allow suffering to be an end in itself or to be regarded in any way as "good."⁴¹

A geometrically conceived unity, with a quite fixed circumference, must always provoke either-or, all-or-nothing choices. It achieves a tidy intellectualism and clarity at the cost of preempting the untidy "richness" of actual experience. In contrast, an organically conceived unity may permit shades of difference and conflicts as healthful stimuli, and it is more faithful to what is required by the actual rough-and-tumble of human experience as well as to the immediate, real, though dim, apprehension of the eternal in

experience. It acknowledges a mystery of mist, of a "confused knowledge" of "rich" reality. Love, even "Pure Love" need not ignore or disengage itself from other ends of self-advantage or motive—provided such ends do not become controlling. A more ample view of unity may include within it both reciprocity and action so that there can be a continuum between that which lies inherent in the human heart which prompts it to be receptive, and that which is disclosed to it by virtue of divine initiative. Mysticism, thus corrected, prompts the development of the *person* while it encourages his apprehension of transcendence in that divine discontent which he perceives within his person.

BRUNNER IN THE LIGHT OF VON HÜGEL

In view of the great differences between Brunner and von Hügel, we must take seriously their common assumption that Christianity must involve a "personalism." It suggests that if a distinctly Christian Mysticism is possible, it must augment and certainly not annul the personalist element. *Whether* a Christian Mysticism is in fact a viable theological position is a question about which von Hügel and Brunner disagree, but the study of both suggests that the test, the theoretical condition of its possibility, is the presence in mysticism of that feature which is essential to its being a *Christian* mysticism—the "personal." Just how this essential "personalist" element is to find theological expression remains unresolved—a perennial challenge to Christian theology.

The chief issue which influences the two estimates of the personal and the mystical is the attitude toward "continuity." Underlying von Hügel's estimate of the relationship of mysticism and personalism is his view of mysticism as a complex and not as a type. He is thus free to find *in* this complex phenomenon certain elements capable of contributing to a personalism. His presuppositions are also related to his view of "person" as a "unity-in-diversity" in which growth is not unilinear but multilinear, and in which introspection need not be egocentricity but a prerequisite of growth. For Brunner we find, however, that "continuity" is, in a word, his summary of what is wrong with mysticism. Accordingly, he chiefly tries to combat mysticism by asserting the "discontinuity" of the man-God relation.

Brunner's theology does not, however, altogether avoid continuity, as he insists that it must. Encounter requires a continuity of *present time*, an immediacy of contemporaneity, between the "I" and the "Thou." Thus there is a sense in which Encounter can be regarded as *immediately given knowledge* so that Brunner allows *time*, if not reason, to be a universal matrix, unifying men. This possibility is shown by his special stress on the church as a living fellowship (and not a depository of doctrine) within which men *presently* encounter the living Christ.⁴² His view of the role of theology, and especially the task of apologetics, also shows that on the one

hand he puts away the autonomy and "continuity" of a rationalism, but that on the other he substitutes for it a language of paradox which serves as a reminder for the community of what it presently (immediately?) believes. The sociality of the community should not obscure the fact that the meaning of the paradox is found "inside" it and is exclusive to it. One must first be inside before the meaning of the paradox is either understood, grasped, or encountered. A reliance on paradox thus can have the effect of sealing off the community from communication with the "outside" by reason of its use of a language that only members of the community can comprehend. This appraisal is affirmed by Brunner's view of apologetics and of theology as an elucidation of that which is already believed. A believer, in Brunner's opinion, can thus give no reasons for his faith, he can only point to the faith he already (presently) has.⁴³

Here there is a lapse, I think, in Brunner's scrupulous avoidance of immediacy and "continuity." There is an immediacy of contemporaneity between the "I" and the "Thou."⁴⁴ And there is an immediacy of interiority—an exclusivism—in a community that speaks primarily to itself, in theological language modeled specially for its own *understanding of itself*. Brunner does not altogether avoid all forms of "immediacy" and "continuity" and, therefore, he does not altogether avoid a feature he himself regards as "mystical."

A second line of criticism lies in the fact that Brunner develops his theology of Christian personalism by means of its contrast with "impersonal" elements. Some of these, however, as von Hügel's view shows, can be extremely useful if not essential to the "person." Truth of the objective-subjective antithesis and ethical principles, ends, and motives are, I think, rightly regarded as "things" useful to the "person." In Brunner's conception and development of personalism, it is difficult to give these "thing-elements" a legitimate place, try as he might. It is true that Brunner recognizes the need, or rather the necessity, of an impersonal element in personal relationships, but it is impossible in his theology to admit the *desirability* of a "thing-element" in personal relationship—e.g.: "Man is only 'person' in a parabolic, symbolic sense, 'person' who is at the same time 'not person,' a 'thing': God is pure personality; man is not."⁴⁵ The fact that Brunner excludes "things" on principle (that they are impersonal) means that, if he is to be consistent, he must treat all things as equally impersonal and as equally useless to the "person." In the process he discards far too much. He all but discards man's capacity to make rational moral decisions because to do so is to employ a "thing," a reason, as an end. Here we have come very close to a feature of "false mysticism" von Hügel describes as pure or disinterested love: the ideal of detachment from "things," the refusal to distinguish between one "thing" and another—all being indistinguishable in the Divine Unity.

A look at Brunner's theology from the standpoint of von Hügel suggests several avenues of further thought. 1) It raises the question of whether it is possible or even desirable to write theology with an eye to expunging from it all mysticism. Some traces, in the form of temporal immediacy and in the form of unmotivated love ("disinterested love," the mystics called it) seem to creep in through the cracks. 2) Brunner works within an antithesis which asks us to choose between two types of religion. But is the antithesis necessary? Must the choice be mysticism and impersonalism versus I-Thou encounter and personalism? The choice seems dictated by strict typological thinking in the first place. 3) Can we be as sure as Brunner appears to be that "continuity" is, in itself, a depersonalizing idea? Need the act of introspection imply outright subjectivism and an abridgment of transcendence? Feeling that it is necessary to keep a strict account of whether it is we who act or God who acts implies an overly mechanical view of the self as a kind of billiard ball that either acts or is acted upon. The choice for von Hügel would not be either-or. 4) Not every element in the mystical-contemplative tradition is desirable. The list of fanaticisms and excesses is long and often recited, but the most responsible theological commentary on mysticism is not achieved by treating mysticism as a type of religion but as a complex of goods and evils. And, certainly, given the popular interest in mysticism today, responsible ecumenical commentary is sorely needed.

NOTES

1. Dom Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963) and J.-M. Dechanet, *Christian Yoga* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). These books, both written by Benedictines, were suggested by the Anglican Novice Mistress of St. Mary's Convent, Wantage, England, who said that one of her novices regularly employed the technique of Yoga as part of her discipline.

2. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), p. 48.

3. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1939), pp. 97-98.

4. According to Brunner, the words "relic" and "remnant" are not actually used by the Reformers though the conception is close to their meaning. "There can be no shadow of doubt that Luther, when he speaks of 'conscience,' 'reason,' *theologia naturalis*, etc., regards them as relics of man's original relation with God, in spite of the hopeless 'corruption' into which he has fallen." Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 95 n.

5. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis* in Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr., ed., *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), p. 80.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 81. To Brunner, Barth seemed much too reckless on this point in letting go man's humanity. Thus, Barth in "Nein!": That "man is man and not a cat" is "quite unimportant." Barth seemed to Brunner to be clearly out of step with the Reformers. See Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 95.

7. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 96.

8. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 187.

9. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), pp. 77-78.

"This is the solution I suggest: first of all, that the formal structural *Imago* does not consist in the possession of reason, or a 'rational nature' existing in its own right (as it were), but in man's relation to God as responsibility (a relation which cannot be lost), as responsible personal being; secondly that the existence of a merely formal responsibility, without its material fulfillment through the love of God, is the result of the Fall and of Sin."

10. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

11. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 118 and 179; *Man in Revolt*, p. 437; *Revelation and Reason*, p. 45.

12. Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 2nd edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 109.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

16. Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), pp. 154, 155, 160, 165.

17. Brunner, *The Mediator*, p. 278.

18. Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, p. 47.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 122. It is just at this point that we find the roots of situation ethics in Brunner.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 111; cf. p. 134.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 327.

25. Emil Brunner, *Die Mystik und Das Wort* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1924), p. 2.

26. His list includes the contemplation of the Neo-Platonist; the 'Ideas of the Idealist'; proofs for the existence of God; the moral postulates of Kantianism; the vision of the religious artist and musician. ". . . I summarize all these varieties of religion under the concept of 'universal religion': because the revelation upon which it is based is regarded as something universal in character. . . ." Brunner, *The Mediator*, pp. 29-30.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

28. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, p. 41.

29. Brunner, *The Mediator*, p. 119.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

31. Von Hügel's Germanic writing style—"barbaric" as Dean Inge pronounced—predisposed him to such word-clusters. He never seemed satisfied with any one way of saying a thing and made endless qualifications usually by means of a seemingly endless number of clauses within a single sentence. He is a "both-and" rather than an "either-or" thinker.

32. Baron Friedrich Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: J. M. Dent & Co., Ltd., 1923) Vol. I, Ch. 2, pp. 50-82.

33. Baron Friedrich Von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., Ltd., 1923), 2nd series, p. 240.

34. Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, II, 267.

35. Von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses*, 1st series, p. 279.
36. Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, II, 281-282.
37. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa Contra Gentiles*, Anton C. Pegis, trans. (Garden City: Doubleday Image Books, 1955), I. 30. [3] and [4].
38. Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, II, 288.
39. Ibid.
40. Baron Friedrich Von Hügel, *Eternal Life* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), pp. 153-154.
41. Von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses*, 2nd series, pp. 198 ff.
42. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 8, 11, 12, 17.
43. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, p. 255. "Thus when a believer is asked: Why do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? he can only answer: Why should I not believe since Jesus confronts me as the Christ, when He meets me in the story and witness of the Apostles as the Christ? It is not the believer who needs to give reasons, but the unbeliever. . . ." See also *The Mediator*, p. 201-202.
44. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 206.
45. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 140.