

# **Unconditional Obedience and Human Freedom Limitation in Emil Brunner`s Thinking**

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## **Abstract:**

Could we consider our freedom to be limited from the start by God`s will or does it imply an unconditional obedience to the Creator, as in a “Master – servant” relationship with God? Or on the contrary, we might understand our relationship with the heavenly Father in a “Parent – child” pattern, and therefore we cannot believe that God expects an unconditional obedience from us or that our freedom is limited. This is the issue addressed by the current study, in a humble attempt to compare two theologies: the Western Protestant one, through the voice of the theologian Emil Brunner, and the Eastern patristic one, through the testimony and spiritual experience of the Church Fathers and of some Orthodox modern theologians.

## **Keywords:**

Obedience, choice, freedom, limitation, human person, Protestant theology, Orthodox theology, Parent – child relation, Master – servant relation.

## **Introduction**

The study addresses two key concepts of Emil Brunner`s thinking (Protestant theologian, 1889-1996, 50 years after he passed away were commemorated in 2016), and of Protestant theology in general, namely the unconditional man`s obedience to God, and the limitation of human freedom, generated either by God`s creation of man, or by other post-human-creation factors.

The theological terms will be analysed from a critical point of view, via the teaching of the Orthodox Church, foreign to the two Western points of view.

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## Human being`s Unconditional Obedience to God

In Emil Brunner`s thinking<sup>2</sup>, freedom means unconditional obedience to God, concretised in a positive answer to God`s call and choice, because in this world “we are not independent, but dependent-on-God (*wir sind nicht selbst ständig, sondern Gott-ständig*)”<sup>3</sup>. If we understand human freedom, it might lead us to understand human mystery.

Emil Brunner states that “the crucial issue in understanding human freedom is the very understanding of the human being (*das Verständnis des Menschen*). ... But who doesn`t understand human freedom cannot understand the human being. And those who do not understand the man`s “lack-of-freedom”, cannot understand sin. The theology of the primary Christianity, of the Church Fathers, defends human freedom first of all, in order to discard the antique determinist teachings and to understand the human being in the dignity of the person and in theresponsibility given by God. But this interest for freedom prevented it from having a right understanding of sin and guilt (*dieses Interesse an der Freiheit liess es zu keinem rechten Verständnis der Sünde und Schuld kommen*)”<sup>4</sup>.

Unfortunately, we cannot agree with Emil Brunner regarding “the understanding of sin and guilt”. We consider thatthe Church Fathershave a complex and thorough understanding of the two notions above, reflecting itself as it is in the teachings of the Christian Church for more than 2000 years. Brunner`s remark is once again provocative because it comes from the representative of a Protestant theology that strongly repudiates here and there the influence of sin and of passions on human life, the struggle against passions, the asceticism, the spiritual perfection etc. Unanimously, the Church Fathers not only studied the theme of man's sin, making an uninterrupted reference to the words of the Holy

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<sup>2</sup> Emil Brunner, considered one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, was born in 1889 in Winterthur and died in 1966 in Zürich. He was a professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Faculty of Theology in Zürich between 1924 and 1953, and his work and theologydecisively influenced the modern and contemporary theological thinking on one side, and the social and economic Western life on the other side, through his ethic and sociological studies. He adhered to the “Dialectical Theology” movement, a Protestant theology current, born in Germany in the interwar period, as a reaction to the liberal Protestant theology of the nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup>Emil Brunner, *Ein offenes Wort. Vorträge und Aufsätze 1917-1962*, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1981, p. 334.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung. Dogmatik II*, Zwingli Verlag Zürich, 1950, p. 140.

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Scriptures and to the entire Christian Tradition, but also described in a comprehensive manner the correct meaning and consequences of passions and guilt, going even further through revealing the way to forgiveness of sins and to perfection, for a complete communion with God, alike the saints who have transfigured their lives into the kingdom of God. In our opinion, Brunner's thesis is once again erroneous, given that the author explains it using as starting point the thesis that Blessed Augustine (354-430) was the first to systematize the conception of sin and guilt<sup>5</sup>, when in fact he was one of those who encountered barriers in deepening these notions within the Church. This is one of the reasons why Orthodoxy does not call him "saint", but only "blessed". It is very true that Blessed Augustine had a controversy with the Stoics and the Manicheans in the attempt to defend Christianity on this issue. He considered the nature of sin as "non-freedom" and emphasized the *non posse non peccare* formula addressed against Pelagius. In the Middle Ages, the issue was resumed in the enthusiasm of the debates about the free will. Blessed Augustine's understanding of the sin was diminished, and the Reformers had to remind people that the sinner is characterized by *servum arbitrium*. But once again, the emphasis on *servum arbitrium* combined with Blessed Augustine's doctrine of sin made possible the opening toward a new form of determinism, which in modern times - in the era of naturalism and pantheism - has a devastating effect.

Brunner believes that "it is absolutely necessary to urgently reformulate the Christian doctrine about freedom and non-freedom (*es ist des halbdringend von nöten, die Lehre von Freiheit und Unfreiheit neuzufassen*)"<sup>6</sup>. Without analysing this approach of the Swiss theologian in all its aspects and details, we have the feeling that things become more and more complicated, because instead of reverting to the initial doctrine of the first centuries Christian Church, the Protestant theologian tries to reformulate the doctrine, without taking into account the depth and richness of the Church Fathers theology and even without any direct connections to the Primary Church's life, an unimaginable thing for the Orthodox Christian doctrine. The Orthodox Church has no dogmatic news and will never have, its only novelty is the actual and alive explanation of the life of Christ adapted to the respective times, starting from the teachings of the Holy Scripture, "which was born in the bosom of and for the benefit of the Church as a written memory of the Apostolic Tradition, of the Revelation, in order to feed and maintain the authentic Christ transmitted through the entire Tradition"<sup>7</sup>. Father

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 49.

Staniloae states that "Christian dogmas are not a system of teachings, a finite system in its perspective and depending on people for its limited fulfilment, but the interpretation of the reality of Christ in the process of its expansion into human beings. As such, Christian dogmas express the most obvious Revelation, because Christ urges us with His love and power, as a perfect divine-human reality. Christ is thus the living, all-encompassing and working dogma of the whole salvation."<sup>8</sup>

Humanity might change, it may adopt oscillating form of language or fluctuating manifestations, transforming them in as many advantages and disadvantages, with various consequences and effects, but the teaching of the Church remains always the same. All throughout this *river* of change, the truth revealed by Christ to the world remains unchanged, and the law of love prevails as the only language capable of answering any question at any moment during the "evolution" of humanity. Thus, in their thinking and writings, the Holy Apostles and the Church Fathers, as direct followers of the teachings of Christ the Saviour and of His power and holiness, compressed all human questions and problems.

As far as the doctrine of freedom is concerned, it is one of the starting points of the Orthodox doctrine that does not bear re-composing and re-interpretations, as it is the case for the Protestant doctrine that loses the original idea, the thematic content and the original argument, only for *the sake of innovation*. "Personal theological reflection must be animated not by the desire for originality at all costs but by the explanation of what is common inheritance and serves the salvation of the faithful of the Church at that time. This reflection must remain in intimate connection with the life of prayer and ministry of the Church, in order to deepen and revive this ministry. Without it the Church could become formalist in its ministry, and theology could become cold and individualistic."<sup>9</sup> Orthodoxy is not an opinion but a teaching of faith, and as such any reference to it must go to the origin-heart of the writings of the Church Fathers, of the Holy Scripture and of Tradition.

To a questioning like the Protestant theologian`s, we answer that the teaching of the Eastern Church is the same in all times: today, as in the early Christian centuries, when religious debates had a different amplitude and were more ardent, more vivid. In the fourth century, for example, in Constantinople, in the public squares and on the streets, were discussed not only political subjects, but also dogmatic ones, such as whether the Son of God was a true man or only a true God who absorbed the human nature. Consequently, the answers of the Primary Church, through its ecumenical councils, to these "public issues of general interest" did not come as a result of Church initiatives or of the Byzantine

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

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Emperor, but due to pressing daily necessities to clarify things once and for all. It is true that the form is slightly altered and adapted to the possibility of understanding of the modern man, but the content of the dogma is the same as it was a thousand or two thousand years ago, because "dogmas, although defined in form, have infinite content, which is always demanded and increasingly revealed, without ever being able to be completely brought to light."<sup>10</sup>

If we go back to Emil Brunner's intention regarding the doctrine of liberty, one can easily notice its construction based on the idea of sin, often considered as an original element in Protestant thinking and the one guilty for the loss of true human freedom. The Protestant theologian is convinced that "by sin man has lost his original freedom" (*der Mensch hat durch die Sünde die ursprüngliche Freiheit verloren*). He is no longer free to fulfil his divine destiny and to be good, as God would have wanted him to be. Evil has taken hold of us (*das Böse hat von uns Beschlagnommen*), a radical evil that we cannot escape through a simple "revolution of conviction" (*von dem wir uns nicht durch eine blosse "Revolution der Gesinnung" [Kant] zutrennen vermögen*), according to Immanuel Kant's theory. If we could have done that, we would not have needed salvation. To acknowledge the necessity of deliverance and to admit the incapacity of doing it is one and the same thing (*die Notwendigkeit einer Erlösung kennen und diese Unfähigkeit zugeben ist eins*)<sup>11</sup>.

The Swiss theologian thinks the "lack-of-freedom" comprised in the slavery of sin, called *servumarbitrium* in Western religious language, has nothing to do with mechanical determinism. "The slavery of sin implies a kind of existence, responsible and free, and not a causal, deterministic one (*ein Modus des verantwortlich freien, nicht des kausaldinglichen Seins*). Man is also a mechanism (*der Mensch ist natürlich auch ein Mechanismus*) which moves after the Galilee's law of gravity and after other mechanical laws of motion. Save that from this point of view, he is not a man, but rather than otherwise, a body. At the same time, man is also an organism (*ein Organismus*), like plants or animals, determined by the same biological laws (*von denselben biologischen Gesetzen bestimmt*), valid in this space. From this point of view, he is *nothumanus*, but rather a mammal (*ist er als solcher nicht „Humanus“, sondern bloss Säugetier*). From a biological point of view, his human existence, his *humanitas*, is wonderful and incomprehensible. But he also has a "dimension" that biologists have missed (*eine „Dimension“, die dem Biologisch fehlt*) –the moral law, the self-awareness, freedom, responsibility. For a mechanic the body is a miracle, and for a biologist also, humanity is a miracle, the wonder of moral freedom and the wonder of what we

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> E. Brunner, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung*, p. 141.

call soul. These limitations of causality belong to our natural experience of the world (*diese Begrenzungen der Kausalität gehören zu unserer normalen Welterfahrung*)<sup>12</sup>.

The same problem is also addressed by Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993), but in a different manner, specific to Eastern theology. He considers the "miracle" of man's creation by God to lie in the fact that man is not a mechanism, but a free subject, who can do good voluntarily and not because of a necessity or a need of unconditional subjection to the Creator, thus progressing for good and for God. This is not about the evolutionism of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), but about the continuous labour of sacrifice of man's likeness to God, in his personal endeavour to maintain and strengthen his own freedom. At the moment when man ceases this struggle, the danger of falling under the slavery of passions appears. "God did not create man as an automatic piece in a gear of a nature inflexible in its processes, but as a free subject capable of flexing the processes of nature in order to willingly do good and thus to show the conformity with the good will of God, progressing in his likeness to Him. A mechanical framing of man in the order of a mechanical nature would have made the creation of the world as well as of man useless. But the creation of a nature that can attract man into an automatism which, for his sensitivity echoing in the spirit, might take the proportions of absolute passions requires man to fight for the preservation and strengthening of his freedom in order to liberate both the nature and his body from the automatism of framing in nature with his passionate resonances. Man cannot become a piece entirely like nature, but becomes passionate when it falls under its dominion, as well as when affirming its dominion over it, he becomes virtuous, spiritually fortified. That is why he was given the command to master nature. If he followed this commandment, he would affirm his freedom and the strengthening of the spirit through it. The commandment was not intended to make man a slave, but to strengthen him in his freedom and communion with God. It required man to remain human and to fortify himself as a human being, superior to nature."<sup>13</sup>

So the following question arises – the theologian Emil Brunner goes on: Is it necessary to merely accept these limitations of human freedom? Or is there a far greater reality than human freedom that can be subsumed to divine reality? No human being lives without asking these questions, perfectly natural and characteristic of human nature. Divine revelation is the only able to answer here, and the answer is the following: human freedom is based on the Creator's freedom. That's why human freedom also becomes his responsibility. And the meaning of responsibility is life in the love of God, freely given to us in His Word,

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 196.

<sup>13</sup> Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 282.

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Jesus Christ. Man finds his true freedom in this love, the freedom that unleashes him from the constraints of sin. "The freedom of God cannot be known from the man`s point of view (*die Freiheit Gottes aber ist das vom Menschen aus nicht Erkennbare*), but opens only in the freedom of Revelation, i.e. in the miracle of "supernatural" Revelation, in its perfection: the miracle of incarnation and reconciliation (*das Wunder der Gottmenschheit und der Versöhnung*). And this miracle of the "divine revelation" is the only thing the Bible speaks about. All other so-called "miracles" (*alle so genannten «Wunder»*), from the Old Testament and from the New Testament, are only "companions" (*Begleitung*) of this unique miracle of the Revelation, of the coming of God towards people"<sup>14</sup>.

One of the current "miracles" of the Orthodox Church is the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist that frees man from the slavery of sin and from other servitudes. "The pneumatological dimension of the Eucharist is also presumed in the very notion of "synergy". This dimension is the Spirit that makes Christ present in the period between the two comings: namely, when the divine work does not impose itself to humanity, but it offers itself to the acceptance through human freedom, and by communicating itself to man, it makes him genuinely free"<sup>15</sup>.

For Emil Brunner, freedom is limited to an existence in relation to God and to unconditional obedience to Him, that is, obedience to the call of God and through it, to discovering and meeting the choice in our own life. An absolute choice outside the relationship with the Creator is in fact a denial of God. "The only reason to say no to the Gospel is the desire to be God yourself (*der Wille, selbst Gott zu sein*), i.e. the misunderstanding of freedom (*missverstandene Freiheit*), or the absolute freedom. It's just like saying: I do not want to have any God, but I want to be God. When it comes to us, it's always about freedom. Are you just free or are you free through God and in God? Do you want to put your desire first, or do you want to admit that you are already called, or, in other words, do you want to recognize the call to responsibility or you just want to be without any responsibility (*willst du den Ruf zur Verantwortung anerkennen oder willst du verantwortungslos sein*)? As we understand it today, freedom is simply identical to nihilism. The freedom through God, the freedom to respond to the call of the Creator and Lord by faith (*die Freiheit, dem Ruf des Schöpfers und Herrn im Glauben zu antworten*), is the revelation of eternal love and eternal life. The clarification of this choice is the mission of Christian existential philosophy (*diese Wahl klar zumachen ist der Dienst der christlichen Existentialphilosophie*), but the

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<sup>14</sup> E. Brunner, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung*, p. 197.

<sup>15</sup> John Meyendorff, *Teologia Bizantină*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1996, p. 276.

choice and the decisions are for yourself to be taken (*aber die Wahl, die Entscheidung, muss du selbsttreffen*)<sup>16</sup>.

In another context, Brunner states the following: "The commandment is God's, and man is the one who obeys (*Gottes ist das Gebieten, der Mensch aber ist das Gehorchen*). God and man stand on equal terms in front of each other. Life between God and man is life with separate roles. Man is the equal partner of God (*Mensch ist der gleichartige Partner Gottes*), who can talk to him on equal terms. This is the form of the original sin: a man's false independence from God (*das ist die Urform der Sünde, die falsche Selbständigkeit des Menschen Gott gegenüber*)<sup>17</sup>. In the opinion of the Swiss theologian, legalism means non-freedom. The good done only due to a mere sense of duty is not good. There is a paradox here: the sense of "must", through which I learn what freedom is, reveals a formal freedom announcing I am still addicted to sin. The law shows me that my initial relationship with God, supposed to be the initial presupposition of God, was destroyed, concludes Brunner<sup>18</sup>.

Similarly, asserts the Protestant theologian, freedom means liberating man from the sense of "must," from the connection with the law. Freedom is life founded on grace, on the gift of God, and it means to find yourself in God and to have roots in Him. In turn, it also means to be free from the obligation to seek your own good. Freedom means a total dependence on God (*Freiheit ist die völlige Abhängigkeit von Gott*), i.e. the renunciation of any kind of independence or the illusion of independence from God (*die völlige Preisgabe aller Selbstständigkeitsansprüche und alles Selbstständigkeitswahnnes Gott gegenüber*). To be free is to be that thing God created us for. For us, who are not God, there is no freedom in ourselves, as aseity (*für uns gibt es nicht Freiheit als „aus sich selbst Sein“, als Aseität*). For the creature, the only possible freedom is a *Deo esse*<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding the image of God in man, Emil Brunner uses the mirror metaphor. It reflects the intention of God only through the man's submissive answer to the gift given by Him. "The man created in the image of God is the being receiving its distinct existence through a divine call of love (*dass er im göttlichen Anruf der Liebe sein besonderes Sein empfängt*). He receives it in such a manner that only then he becomes himself, responding to this full-of-love call of God, through a full-of-love response. This is the very meaning of God's image: to respond to the

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<sup>16</sup> E. Brunner, *Ein offenes Wort*, p. 334.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen. Entwurf einer protestantisch-theologischen Ethik*, Verlag J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, 1932, p. 58-59.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.



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Word of God and to exist responsible thanks to love and for love. Man, unlike things, plants and animals, is the responsible being (*das verantwortliche Wesen*)<sup>20</sup>. Due to the fact that the relationship between God and man cannot be the result of man's impulse, God is always and invariably the first, man is always and invariably the second. God wants to be recognized as Lord in freedom. At the same time, Brunner says God wants the free submission of his creatures. God is the Lord - the Creator, and man is the creature, designed to be freely submitted. God alone is the source of man's existence and freedom<sup>21</sup>.

Emil Brunner places divine will in equivocal terms, striving to find a balance between subordination and equality, although the latter is not a disinterested one: God is either a manifest leader of man, or his friend, having man as a partner in freedom, to receive back what he initially gave. Finally, the bond of friendship between God and man springs, according to Brunner, from the divine desire of leadership and friendship. Man can only submit freely to God, who has an unconditional right to this obedience, being the Creator Lord. Real obedience is an obedience from a free will: that is, a total obedience that cannot think to inquire: how can I put an end to this?

From the statements so far, one can see a legalistic and distant understanding of the relationship between God and man in the approach of the Protestant theologian Emil Brunner, an understanding that reveals God's perception more as the Master or Creator and less as the heavenly Father of people. The outlined relationship between God and man is rather a "Master - servant" one.

In contrast, Eastern thinking considers God as the heavenly Father first of all, as our Father, and as a result we all live in parental love, and we have a freedom that reminds us of our state of God's sons. In Orthodox theology, "the reign of Christ has never been disconnected from the bond with His goodness. This goodness was paradoxically seen as the reign of the "slain Lamb" (*Rev 5: 12-13*), and the term "Almighty" was associated to the good, gentle and familial "Parent"<sup>22</sup>.

Paul Evdokimov (1901-1970) considers this parental relationship of God with the world, built in the "Parent-child" frame, to have its source in the relationship of God the Father with His Son. Thus, the world can be explained and understood through the eternal love of the Holy Trinity. "The word *God* makes us spontaneously think of a being possessing all powers, which puts His omnipotence first; this omnipotence is never omnipotence in itself, without an object. «I believe

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<sup>20</sup> Emil Brunner, *Das Wort Gottes und der moderne Mensch*, Zwingli Verlag, Zürich, 1947, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, *Wahrheit als Begegnung*, Zwingli Verlag Zürich, 1963, p. 29 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 196-198.

in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.» God's omnipotence is *paternal*. First and foremost, God is the Father, and then the Creator, the Judge, and what lies in the heart of the Christian hope, He is the Saviour and the Comforter. He is all this because He is a Father. Similarly, if the *divine paternity* is at the heart of the vision of God, the eternal communion between the Father and the Son is at the centre of the vision of God, the centre of *Revelation* being the communion between the Father and man, his child. The essential theme of salvation is adoption - making us His children. The decisive word of the Christian faith is pronounced by the Holy Spirit in man, calling from within *Avva, Father*. The fundamental religious category is that of paternity<sup>23</sup>.

Taking further an idea of Dionysius the Areopagite, Father Dumitru Stăniloae affirms: "Only a God who is Father and Son makes all the paternity and filiation explicit, says Dionysius the Areopagite, developing the words of St Apostle Paul (*Eph 3: 14-15*). The warmth of human differentiated reactions comes from the existence of a God who is not alien to the affection of such relationships. And these relationships are sanctified by God through the Holy Spirit. ... Through the Incarnate Son, we enter into a filial communion with the Father, and through the Spirit we pray the Father or we talk to him as sons. For the Spirit unites with us in prayer"<sup>24</sup>.

### **Limitation to Human Liberty**

For Emil Brunner, human freedom is limited in an ontological sense, by the nature of the human being, not by its fault, but because God decided so, by divine choice, before creating man. "Right from the start, this freedom of man was a bonded, dependent freedom (*diese Freiheit ist von vornher eineinegebundene*). It is not a primary liberty, but a secondary one. Indeed, it does not authenticate itself, as does the ego in Idealism, but is authenticated, it is *nota se*, but *a Deo*. That is why the answer is a free one, but a free-limited one (*darum ist auch die Antwort wohl eine freie, aber eine gebunden-freie*)"<sup>25</sup>.

The limitation of human freedom, argues Brunner, is based on the God - man relationship, an even chronologically structured relationship: first comes the election and the calling from God, and afterwards comes the answer of man. By its second position, freedom becomes conditional and therefore limited. "Human freedom is not first, but second (*nicht das erste, sondern das zweite*). There is

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, Trad. Gabriela Moldoveanu, Editura Asociația Christiana, București, 1995, p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 196-198.

<sup>25</sup> E. Brunner, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung*, p. 65, 66.

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something preceding it, namely what establishes freedom and, at the same time, what limits it (*was diese Freiheit begründet und zugleich begrenzt*). The man who understands his freedom as founded in God perceives it as something that is prior to his own will (*der ein Wille vorausgeht*), therefore requesting our will. In this mysterious imperative, we can see an encounter between the "unconditional first" and the "conditioned second" (*eine Begegnung zwischen einem Unbedingtem Ersten und einem Bedingten Zweiten*), between the absolute freedom of God and the instituted freedom of man and, at the same time, the freedom limited by God (*von Gott gesetzten, gleichzeitig begrenzten Freiheit des Menschen*). Behind this encounter rules no human logic. Moreover, logic has to stop here, and what is happening during this encounter is to be accepted as *the last and the unjustified*<sup>26</sup>.

In our opinion, as far as the analysis of the concept of human freedom starts with the reality of its limitation, the subsequent results and conclusions are from the beginning destined to a limited and unsatisfying understanding. The Eastern Church never spoke about the limitation of human freedom. St. Basil the Great (330-379) says: "God does not use his omnipotence against human freedom that he does not want to violate"<sup>27</sup>, and therefore man gave up his freedom through freedom itself. In other words, the magnificence of creating man consists in the endowment of his nature with complete freedom, according to the model of God's liberty, not in absolute terms, as in God Himself, but not as limited as Brunner believes. St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) places both freedom and free will under the very sign of God's image in man, thus considering man`s freedom complete. In addition, man cannot be forced to be in communion and union with God, not even in virtue of applying the philosophical requirement of God's "goodness." Human being`s freedom, according to Orthodox theology, is so profound that during the Last Day of the Future Judgment man will once again have the opportunity to reject Christ and choose hell or follow Him and live forever in communion with Him<sup>28</sup>.

Freedom conditioning, considered by Emil Brunner as being at the same time the "centre of the human being" is directly related to the answer man owes to God. "In any case, man has a conditional freedom (*der Mensch aber hat bedingte Freiheit*). This is the centre of his being as a man, and he possesses freedom thanks to this "condition" (*Bedingung*). In other words, this conditional freedom is the very purpose man was created for: he possesses this "freedom" in order to

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<sup>26</sup> Brunner, *Ein offenes Wort*, p. 343.

<sup>27</sup> Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 283.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J. Meyendorff, *Teologia Bizantină*, p. 296.

answer God, so that in his answer God is glorified and gives Himself to His creature<sup>29</sup>.

With the above considerations of the Protestant theologian, we are faced with an alternative paradoxically allowing a single answer. In other words, man receives freedom, but in the very next moment his option is annihilated because the purpose of the gift is to directly reflect the Creator's glory. Brunner believes freedom is not a gift of the human person allowing to perfect yourself or to perish, but a form of giving back, reflecting, and mirroring the Creator's greatness as if He constantly needed to gaze at Himself into thousands of shimmering shards, which, in their turn, they amuse themselves with the apparent capacity of decomposing the light, not realizing they only do so to recompose and glorify the ability of devotion.

Orthodoxy does not share these ideas regarding the gift of freedom and its limits. God created man in His own image and likeness, not to be mirrored in the pale form of creation, but to have another form of life, with his own existence, with self-consciousness, cognoscible reason, will and freedom, which can enjoy the love and endless joy of God through his own conviction and decision. St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) confesses: "Therefore, God the Word, Wisdom and Power, He also built the human nature, not because He was forced to do so by somebody else. He brought man to the world exclusively from an outpouring of His love. Thus because His light must not be hidden, neither His unspoken magnificence nor His unshared goodness, nor might remain inactive any other attributes that we see in the divine nature to prevent that sharing and feeding oneself from them<sup>30</sup>". Human freedom is complete precisely also through the possibility of choosing the opposite, with all the respective consequences and implications. An answer with a predetermined target is no longer a free answer.

How could the condition Emil Brunner talks about be justified in the "equation of freedom"? Why has man limited and conditioned freedom, according to the theologian's statements and conclusions? Is it only because man was brought to life by the Creator, without being asked whether he wanted it or not? Is it only because we are called "God's slaves" (*I Pet 2:16*)? Could this form of freedom guarantee the wholeness and fulfilment of the human person? Here are just a few of the rhetorical questions asked by Emil Brunner in his *Dogmatic*, leaving the reader to find his/her own answer to these inner queries - a however

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<sup>29</sup> E. Brunner, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung*, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele Cuvânt Catehetic*, în *Scieri, Partea a II-a, Scieri Exegetice, Dogmatico-Polemiceși Morale*, (PSB 30), trans. by Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 294.

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characteristic methodology of Protestant theologians for addressing doctrinal teachings.

In Eastern theology, first of all, we do not encounter such an approach, because its role is to bring light, to clarify and to clear up as accurately as possible the questions and perceptions of man, being "a continual bringing to light of its endless content" and "an explanation of what is common inheritance and what supports the salvation of the faithful of the Church at that time"<sup>31</sup>. Regarding the thesis under discussion, human freedom is complete, according to Orthodox doctrine, not in the absolute sense, because only God has absolute freedom, but in the sense that the human person can choose by itself and unhindered by anyone or by anything, can listen to God or not, possibilities that we see, by the way, everywhere in the world the Creator placed us to live in. This doesn't mean God does not advise, urge or support every person at all times, through his divine providence; But it means He doesn't constrain or force anybody, for "what is done by force is not virtue"<sup>32</sup>.

The great Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), a keen researcher of the Western theology, as he lived most of his life in the West, accepts as a simple cause for the incoherence of the limitation of freedom the creation of man in the image and likeness of God: "As a rational being, man can accept or reject the will of God... Thus, whether he chooses good or evil, whether he fulfils the likeness or the non-likeness, man will control his nature freely, because he is a person made in the image of God"<sup>33</sup>.

For the above mentioned Protestant theologian, freedom remains limited by the choice and decision of God, and later on is added His love. Our freedom becomes thus the answer to the call of Jesus Christ and to the challenge of having a relationship with Him, a relationship through which we can also know ourselves, for Jesus Christ revealing Himself to persons helps us discover ourselves at the same time. Again, the purpose of the gift is to give back the love of Christ as a living echo, as a vivid reflection of His glory<sup>34</sup>. Freedom is grounded and must always be based on this relationship. The consciousness of the supremacy of God's glory and of our state of creation always keeps human being's freedom within this

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<sup>31</sup> Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 66, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Sf. Ioan Damaschinul, *Dogmatica*, trans. by Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române București, 1943, p. 127

<sup>33</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, Editura Anastasia, București, s. a., p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> Brunner, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung*, p. 64-65.

relationship and the need to give an answer to our Creator. The limits of freedom therefore focus on the idea of responsibility before God<sup>35</sup>.

For Emil Brunner another cause of the limitation of freedom refers to the laws of nature and its powers, as well as to the freedom of the other "individuals". "The thought that I, a man and an individual, have freedom, but which must be conditioned, it is not really easy to grasp. It is very easy to say: I see too well I am not conditioned and I am limited only by nature and by things, but, above all, by my neighbour (*ich nicht nur von der Natur, von den Dingen bedingt und begrenzt bin, sondern vor allem von meinen Mitmenschen*). My neighbor raises the same claim to be free as I do, and his freedom is, of course, a limitation to my freedom (*seine Freiheit ist selbstverständlich eine Begrenzung der meinen*). I can accept this as a mere fact and submit my desire for freedom with the so-called resignation to the inevitable "this cannot be otherwise." But against this simple factual limitation of freedom there stands my unlimited natural desire for power, and this desire will very easily manifest in trying to force the others, through my power"<sup>36</sup>.

Emil Brunner talks about two human freedoms. He says that by the act of creation we should understand that the entire human existence is determined by the relationship with God. Consequently, the existence of man is understood as a "subject-in-relation" (*Subjekt-in-Relation*) or as a responsible existence (*verantwortliches Sein*), based on these two freedoms: a) the generous love of God granted to man, called to love God in turn and to be in communion with Him; b) human freedom, which must answer to the divine call<sup>37</sup>.

This freedom does not exist in a neutral sphere, far from the world where man has to give his answer. It is not an indestructible freedom or one totally independent from how man has to give an answer. On the contrary, if a person gives a wrong answer to the call of God, if he turns his back to the generous love of God, through this very act he irretrievably loses the gift. Here Brunner argues using the Christ's words from the Gospel of John: "Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave." (*John* 8:34). The loss of liberty is irrecoverable in its form received by man, and Brunner thinks that "from the point of view of man, the breaking up with God is irreparable (*der Bruch im Gottesverhältnis ist vom Menschen aus irreparabel*). Man can no longer recover it, unless God does something in this respect. Human communion with God has now been destroyed (*die Gottesgemeinschaft ist jetzt zerstört*), and the original human freedom altogether. But this doesn't mean his whole freedom has been lost; man has not ceased to be a subject, and his existence has not ceased to be one based on

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>36</sup> Brunner, *Ein offenes Wort*, p. 341.

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung*, p. 135.

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decision. Man is, and remains, a moral personality, but he has lost the opportunity to organize his life in accordance with his divine destiny (*er hat die Möglichkeit verloren, sich seiner göttlichen Bestimmung gemäss selbst zubestimmen*)<sup>38</sup>.

In the view of the Swiss theologian, shared by other Protestant theologians, man's communion with God has been definitively destroyed through sin.

In the East, however, one speaks only about altering the communion of man with God. The basis of this dogma is the full communion of man with God in Jesus Christ, God made Man. Living one`s life in Jesus Christ is, at the same time, a paradox, the fulfilment of human`s nature`s purpose, but also the beginning of the new spiritual life, which never ends in its ascension to the eternal God. St. Gregory of Nyssa says that as we move forward into the spiritual life toward God, we understand more deeply His immenseness and the fact that man is increasingly discovering his impotence and limitations. It is true that man's initial communion (as it was at the beginning with God in the primordial state of the Garden of Eden) was lost, that is, in the event Adam in Paradise, as Brunner likes to say. But the restoration of this communion with God through Jesus Christ is so powerful, current, and dynamic that the memory of man's original state is assumed in this personal communion, fulfilled especially through the Holy Body and Blood of Christ the Saviour who makes us direct partakers of His divine love. The Church Fathers believe the eschatological state of man restored by Christ the Saviour through His Resurrection is higher than the original condition of Adam in Paradise. Of course, the full and final communion of man with God is accomplished in the eternal life. Therefore, St. Paul says that "Now we see but a dim reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (*I Cor 13: 12*).

Regarding the loss of original freedom because of sin, we cannot agree with the Protestant theologian, because freedom was given to man in his original ontological constitution. As a consequence of sin, man has not lost his freedom but the initial understanding of things and the strong will he had at the beginning. The understanding and the will of man were obscured by sin, separating man from God for a while. "So man was pure from evil impulses and with a tendency toward the good of the communion with God and his fellow men, but he was not strengthened in this purity and in this good. He was conscious and free, and in his conscience and freedom he tended to do good. But he had neither fulfilled a progressed conscience of good and truth, nor a secured freedom against the possibility of having some passions. He was not a sinner, but he was not adorned with acquired virtues and with purely consolidated thoughts either. He had the innocence of somebody not having tasted sin, but not the innocence won by rejecting

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

temptation. He was a being with an unspoiled spirit, unbounded by passions, but he was unfortified by exercising in deeds of submitting the body and the world, of updating the contingent elasticity of the world. His body was not subjected to the automatic law of sin, but it didn't have either the strength deepened by the skill to remain immune to such a state. The world did not inflict its processes on his body and spirit like chains he could not free himself from, but it was neither brought under control by his spirit that imposes its power upon it."<sup>39</sup>

It is noteworthy that during the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (347-407), the priest prays personally before reading the Holy Gospel, saying these words: "Shine forth within our hearts the incorruptible light of Thy knowledge, O Master, Lover of mankind, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of the preaching of Thy Gospel; instil in us also the fear of Thy blessed commandments, that, trampling down all lusts of the flesh, we may pursue a spiritual way of life, being mindful of and doing all that is well-pleasing unto Thee. For Thou art the enlightenment of our souls and bodies, O Christ God."<sup>40</sup>

Emil Brunner believes that, once man's relationship with God was broken through sin, he can still find the presence of God in another form, that is, in the form of the Word of God.

From a social point of view, Brunner believes that human freedom is limited by various external or internal factors, yet the human being is the only one in the sphere of creation capable of making decisions by itself and of being responsible for them. "Man has freedom, but only within certain limits (*der Mensch hat Freiheit, aber nur in gewissen Grenzen*). Despite all the dependencies from heredity, physical constitution, environment and historical currents, man is a self-determined being, and therefore a responsible one. We might easily say it is worth noting how little the other theories can influence this fundamental, irrational, unfounded and more or less known conviction of man's freedom and responsibility"<sup>41</sup>.

We can say that, in terms of the environment where freedom manifests, Emil Brunner makes multiple references to the human body as an objective form of manifestation of the free man, placing human freedom in relation to the multitude of people and to the limitation of each one by the others. He considers multiplicity in its various forms to be manifested through individuality. The unity of our

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<sup>39</sup>Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 280-281.

<sup>40</sup>*Liturghier*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2012, p. 147-148.

<sup>41</sup>Emil Brunner, *Christentum und Kultur*, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1979, p. 147-148.



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knowledge, desires and senses cannot cancel the individuality and the insurmountable barrier it contains<sup>42</sup>.

### **Conclusions**

From what was stated so far, it is obvious that, for the Protestant theologian Emil Brunner, human freedom means unconditional obedience to God, materialized in the duty of a positive response to God`s calling and election from eternity. This opinion is built around the idea of sin, considered to be the element the loss of true human freedom has occurred from. Thus appears the slavery of sin, called in the western religious language *servumarbitrium*. At the same time, for the Protestant theologian, human freedom is ontologically limited by the human being`s nature, not by its fault, but because God decided so by His divine choice before creating man. The limitation of freedom is based on the relationship „God – man”, an even chronologically structured relationship: first of all, being the choice and calling from God, and secondly, being the answer of man.

These views supported by the Swiss theologian are contrary to the patristic teaching of the Eastern Church, who speaks neither about man's unconditional obedience to God, nor about the limitation of the human person's freedom. Through divine wisdom, Orthodox thought teaches that man should not unconditionally obey God, and that the freedom offered him by the Creator is not limited. It emphasizes the importance of the human being from God`s point of view, and His constant desire to lead man in a perpetual ascension to perfection, both through the act of personal sacrifice and through the help of divine grace, toward sanctification and deification, toward the communion and union with Him.

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<sup>42</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Scandal of Christianity*, SCM Press LTD, London, 1951, p. 56-57.