

## INTRODUCTION

### The Unending Struggle with Revelation in the Thought of Emil Fackenheim

Emil L. Fackenheim is best known for his confrontation with the Holocaust and his struggle to discover authentic theological significance for Jewish religious faith and historical life in the face of this unprecedented catastrophe for the Jewish people. He crystallized his discovery in what he called the “614th commandment”:

To deny Hitler the posthumous victory of destroying [Jewish] faith was a moral-religious commandment. I no longer hesitated to call it the 614th commandment: for post-Holocaust Judaism it would be as binding as if it had been revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.<sup>1</sup>

He saw that moral imperative as the spontaneous but authentic Jewish response to the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> It is a popular formula, employing and redesigning the language of traditional Judaism, to express what he believed had been shown in historical action by the Jews as a people.

Less well remembered is how deeply and consistently Fackenheim wrestled through his entire career as thinker with the modern challenges

<sup>1</sup> *JBAH*, p. x.

<sup>2</sup> *TMW*, pp. xix–xxii, 10. He reaffirmed its essential character in “The 614th Commandment Reconsidered” (1993), in *JPP*, pp. 193–94. But as his 1992 reply to Reinier Munk had already contended, he rejected any view which imputed to him a tacit claim of revelation that had been somehow made in constructing this as a “commandment.” As he maintains, it was not this that he ever had in mind or was aiming at (even though it was framed precisely as the “614th commandment,” at least implying a link with the 613 commandments traditionally ascribed to the Torah, and hence revealed). See “A Reply to My Critics,” in *FGPJT*, pp. 268–72, 287. His self-defense is that he always spoke equivalently of both “the 614th commandment” and “the commanding voice of Auschwitz,” which were “imposed” only by history: “These Twenty Years: A Reappraisal,” in *QPF*, pp. 17–20; “The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz,” in *GPH*, pp. 79–92; “The 614th Commandment,” and “Jewish Faith and the Holocaust: A Fragment,” in *JRH*, pp. 19–24, 25–42.

made to the concept, the possibility, and the actuality of divine revelation, especially in its specifically Jewish form.<sup>3</sup> His concern with revelation did not start with his 614th commandment with which he launched his post-Holocaust thought. Indeed, insofar as his “commandment” may be characterized as “quasi-revealed,” this might in itself have driven him to probe traditional theology further.<sup>4</sup> But his probe of traditional theology did not end once he had revised the thinking behind this “commandment.” Over time, he put ever-greater stress on the notion that this is better conceived as a “commanding voice,” an absolute *moral* (rather than “quasi-revealed”) duty. This “commandment” uttered by a “voice” (greater than any mere voice of personal conscience) was issued, he argued, primarily to the Jews. It was “imposed” on them as an unconditional moral imperative. But its moral truth is just as essential for the rest of humanity, he claimed, and thus is significant in a world-historical sense.

Fackenheim gradually withdrew any tacit claim for even a “quasi-revealed” status for either the “commanding voice” or his “614th commandment,”<sup>5</sup> making less and less of a religious claim for them, with the consequence that they could not serve as an adequate resolution of the profound religious challenge of modern uncertainties about revelation. As Fackenheim well knew, Judaism had been faced with such uncertainties at least since Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* in 1670.<sup>6</sup> Although Fackenheim’s thought turned toward the Holocaust after 1967, he refused to entirely sever his earlier encounter with the critical doubts cast on revelation from his confrontation with the Holocaust, which he took to be *the* definitive historical manifestation of radical evil. For he did not think these two issues could be separated or compartmentalized. This is especially true of his mature thought.

Prior to 1967, Fackenheim considered the question of revelation and the need to vindicate its historical and positive character to be the most important religious problem of our era. Indeed, he never jettisoned this

<sup>3</sup> “Our Position toward Halacha” [“Unsere Stellung zur Halacha”], in *JTEF*, pp. 21–25, 377–80.

<sup>4</sup> I believe that Steven T. Katz may have been the first thinker and scholar to emphasize and even highlight the continuity of this theme, or even the leitmotif, of revelation in Fackenheim’s thought, both early and late. See his *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, pp. 205–47, and especially 218–25.

<sup>5</sup> *TMW*, pp. 24–26.

<sup>6</sup> Fackenheim’s first direct textual encounter with the biblical criticism of Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* appears in *TMW*: see p. 21. See also the subsequent works: *WIJ?*, chapters 1 and 3; *JBAH*, pp. 8–9. In *QPF* (1968), Spinoza is scarcely mentioned by name; and in *EJMP* (1973), he is mentioned only in the context of Hegel.

concern, even after he shifted his focus to the Holocaust and subsequent Jewish history, as providing the key to any defensible search for philosophical and theological truth.<sup>7</sup> For as he eventually acknowledged, any consideration of whether revelation has been refuted or is salvageable in the modern era cannot avoid what is undoubtedly the most powerful, and most fundamental, historical challenge to all modern religious faith: the presence of evil, most especially radical evil. What forced him to confront this so profoundly came when the Jews were threatened with a recurrence of the Holocaust during the 1967 build-up to Israel's Six-Day War. As Fackenheim put it, this awoke his theology from its dogmatic slumber and quickly turned him toward an unyielding focus on the Holocaust.

Even before 1967 he had been growing keenly aware of the primordial religious and philosophical issues raised by radical evil, and had started to face and eventually contend seriously with its immense challenges. But until 1967 he shunned what he called the “scandal” of the Holocaust in its historical specificity and uniqueness. The fruit of his reflections on radical evil is concentrated in a still-powerful article about Immanuel Kant's attempt to resolve the theological dilemmas raised by radical evil.<sup>8</sup> Fackenheim asserted there that although the issue of radical evil is traditionally linked solely with the teachings of revelation, it must also be confronted by any serious and honest modern philosopher. Indeed, by presenting himself as a “post-Hegelian Hegelian” both before and after 1967, Fackenheim emphasized that insofar as modern philosophy claims,

<sup>7</sup> Fackenheim made the qualifying assertion that his concern with revelation “became, after a while, more hesitant.” But this was not, he claimed, because he entertained any “second thoughts about the ‘return to revelation,’” to which he did not cease to “remain committed” to the end, and even less because it had been rendered null and void by some supervening thought. To be sure, if anything his confrontation with Heidegger's thought and the influence it exercised on him in the 1960s through the 1980s had augmented the relevance of revelation to him: this proved that even secular, atheistic philosophy could not proceed until it generated a concept of revelation. Rather, it was because before 1967 he had not thought through fully, first, the doubtful aspects of his theological approach which had been determined by “its polemical posture” (*QPF*, pp. 7–17), and second, because the implications of the Holocaust had not yet been faced honestly in constructing his theological approach (*QPF*, pp. 17–26). To face honestly the implications of the Holocaust in reconstructing his theological approach, he did not dispense with the fundamental question of revelation, but rather shifted, as it were, its focus. So long as he remained a “religious thinker,” which post-1967 he did remain, and even once he shifted his focus to actual history, he still could not ignore the modern *philosophic* problematic contained in revelation. For its claimed continuity, see *TMW* (1982), p. 7. He reiterates it again in *WIJ?* (1987), pp. 98–102; *JBAH* (1990), pp. 6–19, 25–26; and *JPJP*, p. 226. See also the remarks of the editor in his introduction to Part I, *JPJP*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> “Kant and Radical Evil” (1954) in *TGW*, pp. 20–33.

whether implicitly or explicitly, to rationally continue, defend, secularize, or perfect notions in the Western religious tradition such as God is good, the world He created is good, and man is made “in His image,” it cannot escape the stark and severe challenge posed by radical evil. Indeed, Fackenheim argues that radical evil both in man and in the world should be almost as much, and almost as acute, a challenge for modern philosophy as it is for modern theology and religious faith.<sup>9</sup> Although his focus on radical evil in this article seems to allude to the Holocaust, not one word in it mentions the Holocaust or any other historical event. Thus, radical evil, though not yet connected, at least not explicitly, with a specific historical event,<sup>10</sup> was already an important issue in Fackenheim’s early thought. Nevertheless, since Fackenheim was himself a survivor of the Holocaust, it is likely that he connected the Holocaust with his reflections on radical evil, even in this early period.<sup>11</sup> Personally motivated or not, however, he did not yet regard himself as called upon, as a theologian, to confront the Holocaust directly *in all of its historical specificity*,<sup>12</sup> because he regarded theology as the discipline in which faith thinks through, and cognitively and rhetorically defends, the “leap” by which man transcends history toward eternity. This changed with the growing influence Heidegger’s thought had on Fackenheim, which made him prefer to be known as a Jewish “thinker” rather than a “theologian.” He recoiled, however, from Heidegger’s “leap” of taking a “stance toward Being.”

<sup>9</sup> Michael Oppenheim, *What Does Revelation Mean for the Modern Jew?: Rosenzweig, Buber, Fackenheim*, p. 94. (See also “Theology and Community: The Work of Emil Fackenheim.”) Oppenheim notices a seemingly passing remark (*QPF*, p. 281) originally made around 1966 which shows a significant change in Fackenheim’s attitude toward the fate of the Jewish faith in “the modern secular world” and which indicates (seemingly unwittingly) the direction in which he will subsequently move. This remark makes the claim that it is impossible for religious thought among modern Jews to be truly “authentic” until such thought has exposed itself to Auschwitz.

<sup>10</sup> “Kant’s Concept of History” (1957) in *TGW*, pp. 34–49. Laurie McRobert notices the connection between the two articles in her “Kant and Radical Evil,” in *FGPJT*, p. 24: the dilemma about “radical evil is related to its appearance in history.”

<sup>11</sup> He begins *WIJ?*, p. 13, by telling the following story. In 1938 as a young man, he sat imprisoned in a crowded jail cell among those Jews of Halle, Germany who were about to be transferred to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. An older man asked him: “You, Fackenheim! You are a student of Judaism . . . You tell us what Judaism has to say to us now!” But I, then a rabbinical student aged twenty-two, said nothing.”

<sup>12</sup> Curiously his very first article on Jewish theology (1952) shows him close to the actuality of the Holocaust, and fully aware of “Satan.” See *QPF*, p. 31; and see also pp. 36–37, 86–87, 153, 189, 273–75, 286–87, with retrospective comments on pp. 17–26. See also *TMW*, pp. 9–10.

Major refinements, even transformations, of his mature thought – in *God's Presence in History*, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, *The Jewish Return into History*, *To Mend the World*, and *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust*, as well as in numerous essays and lectures later collected in *Jewish Philosophy and Jewish Philosophers* – modify and qualify, but never surpassed or abandoned, his basic and original conception of “positive revelation.” For he never ceased to believe that the defense of revelation is urgently needed, although he came to wonder whether revelation could still be defended in the terms which he so carefully probed and elaborated in his “first reflections.” Still, he attempted to salvage revelation, even once its vivid coloration as the very life-blood of theology, if not of faith itself, began to pale for him. For he moved from clearly sensing a “divine presence” and “divine call” – both confidently asserted against a deaf and blind secularism – to confronting their rupture by a quasi-divine, virtually anti-divine, radical evil, which manifested itself predominantly by its darkness in the Holocaust “world” of evil, leaving only a distant reminder of the divine in bare glimmers of brightness dimly and sporadically breaking through its absolute night, giving hope for some restoration of light.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the Holocaust became for him a sort of “negative revelation,” a distorted revelation of the Absolute. This only makes sense if we understand his view of “positive revelation.” For revelation, in the sense of divine presence and call, becomes for Fackenheim primarily a *historical* experience, rather than a conceptual instruction or formal lawgiving, as it was for Maimonides. This is History in the manner of the existentialists, Rosenzweig and Buber, whose basic position is dependent on Hegel’s “historicism” because their philosophy defines itself as possible only *post Hegel mortuum*.<sup>14</sup> Like Hegel, they think that man can get closer to God, and can better recognize what God is, in the modern era. This raises us higher than any previous era. They reject Hegel’s belief, however, that we are at “the end of history,” which would give modernity a virtually messianic status. But they accept Hegel’s notion of progress, and agree that we moderns are most advanced in our knowledge of God, which they also agree is best defined historically, but for them this flows through personal affirmation. Fackenheim had the wisdom to perceive that their basic view (even

<sup>13</sup> The dedication to *EJMP*, p. v: “To the Israelis: After darkness, light.”

<sup>14</sup> *TMW*, pp. 21, 120, 282. This is a phrase that was first employed by Eugen Rosenstock in the dialogue of letters with Franz Rosenzweig. See *Judaism despite Christianity*, p. 94.

in the form of “existentialism”) was Hegelian. They pushed him to examine whether Hegel’s claim of truth in history is valid. For it to be the truth, Hegel argues, it must manifest itself in history, through historically manifested stages of development, culminating in our present knowledge of God. Fackenheim concluded that the “personal” – on which his mentors Buber and Rosenzweig focused, in order to give religious awareness the status of “knowledge” – is merely a *form* of historical knowledge, indeed a subordinate form, a mere variation on the main theme of historicity. Even if it is, as they claimed, the key variation, it is still history which properly defines or determines this. Eventually, Fackenheim came to understand the Holocaust as a historical (and hence also philosophical and religious) rupture, caesura, or *novum*. But this moral, if not ontological, cataclysm bears the significance that it has in Fackenheim’s thought because his theology never abandoned the notion of revelation and its possibility, which emerged in his early writings, even though he came to see revelation as conditioned by and consequent on History. At first, he allowed that what had happened in History as revelation could later be validated and, as it were, re-enacted through a moment of “personal” encounter, but later he came to think that what revelation once wrought as “divine presence” cannot be sustained in the face of what is at best a world-historical divine absence, a world-night, at worst an unprecedented revelation of the diabolical in history – a “negative absolute.”

My leading argument is that the core notion of revelation, elaborated in Fackenheim’s early thought, continued to operate in his later thought, unchanged in its basis. But Fackenheim reached full self-consciousness about its basis only after an unrelenting search, spiritual struggle, and confrontation with the Holocaust. Once he reached such full self-consciousness about its basis, however, his core notion of revelation became endowed with an essentially different value and meaning, and was put to a dramatically different use. I will show that the difficulties of his earlier thought anticipate and reflect his later thought, even as it is radicalized. For he came to think that, through the Holocaust, History presented the unimpeded – though admittedly negative – Absolute. Fackenheim’s thought was never so contentless, for he was able to define what was present in the “rupture” of the Holocaust as a historical manifestation of *knowable* radical evil. To oppose it, he saw *tikkunim*, fragmentary mendings of this evil, in patchy or disconnected counters to the “rupture” which also occurred in history. I will argue that it is essential to study Fackenheim’s first reflections on revelation in order to help

determine, if not decide, the tenability of his theological approach to the Holocaust as a rupture in history.<sup>15</sup>

I believe this book is the first to bring together the early and late parts of Fackenheim's thought, treating them as a whole, if a slightly disjointed one. I shall argue that what integrates the seemingly conflicting sides of Fackenheim's thought is his unending search for revelation as a defensible modern actuality, as an unavoidable theological desideratum, and most significantly as what provides access to the truth which abides through and beyond history. This represents the "basis" from which Fackenheim was moved to conduct his lifelong search, for Fackenheim refused to accept that it is self-evident that there is knowable truth which abides through and beyond history. He acknowledged that what we "know" through faith cannot qualify as knowable in the same sense as what we know through reason. But he was also skeptical about the power of reason. He never goes so far as to reject reason, but his thought is rooted in his doubt of there being ultimate rational truth. Therefore, he refuses to be bound by any claim to there being a settled certainty about knowable ultimate truth. This points already in the direction of faith. Everything that follows proceeds from this refusal.

Hence I must put in clearer and sharper focus how to perceive the "basis" of Fackenheim's search for revelation. What made him view this search as of utmost philosophic significance was his growing awareness of how imperative it is to make the effort to know whether there is any ground on which man stands that is solid, whether there is any basis that is firm and unyielding. He gradually came to realize that his radical questioning of whether there is any eternal and transcendent truth raises serious problems for faith as much as for reason. He began with the conviction that the act of faith, itself ultimately grounded in revelation, is the one thing needful for human beings. Thinking through this conviction and its meaningfulness led him to mitigate and qualify it; but it is not evident whether he ever puts its needfulness *entirely* in doubt. Even if it is very much needed, however, it will emerge that the act of faith linked with revelation is also not sufficient, for once Fackenheim acknowledged that

<sup>15</sup> If the thinker is capable of "reading" the significance of History, he may seem to possess a sort of prophetic capacity. Indeed, Fackenheim may have unconsciously moved closer than he wanted to admit to the Maimonidean notion of the prophet. This is the human type that may be characterized as the philosopher-statesman who also possesses a visionary capacity (re the future). Indeed, two of his leading attributes are courage and "divination" as human perfections, in which *natural virtues* manifest themselves. See *Guide* 2.38 (Pines, pp. 376–78).

revelation is not a matter of rational knowledge, it follows that it cannot satisfy our deepest need. This was exacerbated by Fackenheim's mature theological position on the Holocaust and the Jewish historical specificity of this human catastrophe. In Fackenheim's view, reason has shown its deficiency to guide us, for Hegel's system – which had made the last plausible claim to absolute wisdom – had failed to warn against, prevent, or mitigate the Holocaust. This left only revelation for guidance. But revelation cannot provide us with a firm ground to stand on either, because Spinoza and others had challenged the claim of the revealed sources to absolute truth, and their challenge had not been satisfactorily answered. If this were not enough, revelation had also failed to warn against, prevent, or mitigate the Holocaust. This being so, Fackenheim asks if there is anything left that can offer us access to the transcendent.

Fackenheim agreed with his critic Reinier Munk that the “specter [which] haunts my thought” from beginning to end is “the specter of historicism.”<sup>16</sup> I believe this is substantially correct. It relates to something deeply significant and challenging that Fackenheim himself recalled being told as a student: the “great philosophical task” for our era is to “overcome historicism.”<sup>17</sup> Or as he further elucidated it, what is urgently required is “an ‘objective’ standpoint outside or beyond these things,” i.e., beyond the generalized “historical relativity” of all world-views and “previous philosophies.” It is the all-encompassing, all-crushing relativism of historicism leading to nihilism that Fackenheim calls “the specter of historicism.” It holds that no truth transcends its historical era, which of course makes its own truthfulness completely relative to and determined by its historical era; hence it is questionable whether it is valid to call it “truth” at all.<sup>18</sup> Once the “historicity of all things,” the “stern reduction of human being to a stark finitude,” is thoroughly radicalized by Heidegger, it follows that man cannot “transcend his situatedness-in-the-world.” If he is to “transcend” at all, it would have to be with his historical horizon, in some moment or event that somehow escapes being determined by a seemingly all-powerful history, and that event or moment is no longer even conceivable as a fixed-in-form but relative-in-content “human situation.”<sup>19</sup> Such a moment or event, revealing or reflecting something

<sup>16</sup> *FGPJT*, pp. 274–75, 292–93. Fackenheim employs, of course ironically, the rhetorical trope made famous in the first line of the Communist Manifesto. Cf. “Philosophy, History, and the Jewish Thinker,” in *FGPJT*, pp. 144–62.

<sup>17</sup> *TMW*, pp. 152–53. <sup>18</sup> *TMW*, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> For his retrospective view on the defects of his two articles, see *FGPJT*, pp. 293–94.



about Being, would transcend history by directing it for a very long time, since man would henceforth see everything in the light of what it reveals or reflects.

As a result, “the truths attained” by exceptional individuals who perceive the moment or event, as such perceptions accord with Heideggerian existentialism (or with what Leo Strauss prefers to call “radical historicism”), might seem to be “merely autobiographical.”<sup>20</sup> But neither Heidegger nor Fackenheim will admit this, because “the shared destiny of a community” is an element of every person’s “being toward death,” and because “free recovery of the past” is an essential element of present and future possibilities.<sup>21</sup> An event that makes a world-historical impact, as a moment in the history of Being, is known as such by its unprecedentedness. Fackenheim believes that the Holocaust was such an event because “with the administrative murder

<sup>20</sup> Revelation makes an “enormous assertion concerning man’s relation to transcendence” (TMW, p. 50). But transcendence can no longer be conceived as it was prior to man’s discovery of his historicity and of his need for historicity to grasp truth (Hegel), and it can no longer be conceived as it was prior to man’s discovery of his *radical* historicity, which rules as null and void anything which attempts or claims to move beyond man’s finitude, since it is a mere assertion which can never be validated as genuinely “beyond.” Though admitting the force of the three philosophic arguments made by Heidegger in the wake of “broken [Hegelian] middle,” which has issued in various and sundry “self-destructive post-Hegelian positions,” like Hegel he refuses to allow revelation to be reduced to human “experience,” but still defends the intelligibility and the viability of “the incursion of the Other,” which permits human “experience” to be augmented by the Other’s breakthrough. See TMW, pp. 158–59. As for any possible “transcendence” of historicity in historicity (rather than beyond), Heidegger will allow for it. However, instead of such “transcendence” being an asserted “human rise” over and above, i.e., beyond, “finitude” (which is disqualified from the start, since every such asserted “human rise” to anything Infinite is always suspect of being a projection occurring in human finitude on the sky of the Infinite), rather he acknowledges “a hidden transcendence [which] dwells . . . precisely in the endurance of” human finitude. Yet once mere finitude becomes full and radical historicity for Heidegger, following *Being and Time* (with the individual’s confrontation with his finitude further colored and undoubtedly limited by his historical situation), something beyond mere “endurance” will have to be discovered. Fackenheim will discover it in Schelling’s “ecstatic” thought, i.e., pointing beyond itself, as well as unable to comprehend the “why” of certain “facts” (i.e., individual existence, God as “absolute Existent,” and radical evil), “ecstatic” thought must “disclose” something actual which “lies beyond it.” See TMW, p. 240. But his “ecstatic” thought must move beyond Schelling’s to what he will characterize as “resistance”: he deals with a *novum* of history which, though like “Schelling’s pointing-to-evil is both negative and to an absolute,” even so is historically specific (as *Ereignis*), and is not “already overcome by Grace.”

<sup>21</sup> TMW, pp. 160–61.

of millions,” which deprived individual existence on a mass scale of the right to its own “being toward death,” the era of technology in which we dwell reached a level of depravity previously unknown and unimagined as humanly possible. An authentic historicist thinker, which Heidegger claimed to be, was duty-bound, Fackenheim argues, to confront such an event. But Heidegger shut his eyes to the significance of the Holocaust. Confronting the Holocaust as a fateful and unprecedented historical event, as a novel and unique moment in the history of Being, Fackenheim claims will show the limits of Heideggerian radical historicism, and hence to “overcome” it from within, i.e., authentically. Fackenheim does this not by uncovering some previously unknown way to escape historicism by a transcendent rise beyond it, which would subordinate history to an otherworldly eternity, but by showing that in the decisive event of his era, Heidegger failed to be either historicist, or even historical, enough.<sup>22</sup> I will consider whether Fackenheim’s confrontation with the Holocaust exposes a fundamental flaw in Heidegger’s thinking, or shows what truly consistent Heideggerianism would be. Does Fackenheim attain a true Heideggerianism, a most radical historicism, as he claims? Or, in his very act of showing what he thinks it is to be truly “historicist enough” about the Holocaust, has Fackenheim instead reverted to a revised form of the very thinking which he claims to have surpassed? Fackenheim’s concept of the “negative Absolute” of radical evil may derive from the traditional notion of evil. To be sure, radical historicism does not deny the value and meaning of tradition if it is appropriated afresh. However, I wonder whether something eternal and transcendent did not manifest itself to Fackenheim, through the standards by which he measures what the doers of *tikkun* did, and why they did it. In other words, could reaffirming the traditional standards in a new historical situation be an affirmation of eternity rather than temporality or historicity?

Fackenheim’s critique of Heidegger hinges on whether the Holocaust was an *Ereignis* of Being, evident as such in its momentousness, even if the only standard of the distance from or forgetfulness of Being is our constant resort to technology and its rule, as Heidegger claims. Heidegger dismisses the Holocaust as merely another case of technology run wild, and he compares it with mass production of food or armaments. This would make the Jews mere victims of their own

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172–200. Of course, Heidegger’s giving the Holocaust the meaning of a sample of modern technological mass production does not, for Fackenheim, count (other than superficially) as taking it seriously.