

## CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE HOLOCAUST: A DIALOGUE WITH POST-AUSCHWITZ JUDAISM

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**T**HIS PRESENTATION is a modest attempt to confront some overarching ethical issues emerging from the Holocaust and from contemporary Jewry's reflection on that "orienting experience," as Irving Greenberg has termed it. Throughout this essay "ethics" and "morality" are used interchangeably, even though they have often been distinguished in the past on the basis of their grounding (philosophy for ethics, Scripture/theology for morality). Both terms involve fundamental orientation as well as more specific principles and applications. The exploration I am about to undertake will focus almost exclusively on ethics or morality as basic life-orientation, even though towards the end, in treating issues such as power, I will move towards the specific considerations. The contention of the essay throughout is that the experience of the Holocaust has profoundly altered the very basis for morality in our time.

I have addressed aspects of the question in other writings.<sup>1</sup> I am also acutely aware that one of the profoundest ethical challenges facing the Christian Church after the Holocaust is its own credibility as a moral voice. While subscribing to the view held by a number of Jewish and Christian scholars that the principal parents of the Holocaust are to be found in modern secular philosophies which were at their core also anti-Christian, there remains little doubt that traditional preaching and teaching in the churches constituted an indispensable seedbed for the success of the Nazi effort.

The point needs to be made, and made strongly, that if Christianity wishes to enter the general discussion of morality after the Holocaust, it can do so authentically only if it seriously commits itself to a full and final purge of all remaining anti-Semitism in its theology, catechetics, and liturgy, and if it is willing to submit its World War II record to a thorough scrutiny by respected scholars. Likewise, Christianity will need

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *The Challenge of the Holocaust for Christian Theology* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1982); "Christian Perspectives and Moral Implications," in Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, eds., *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy, and Genocide* (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus International Publications, 1980) 295-308; and "The Holocaust: Its Implications for the Church and Society Problematic," in Richard W. Rousseau, S.J., ed., *Christianity and Judaism: The Deepening Dialogue* (Scranton, Pa.: Ridge Row, 1983) 95-106.

to confront the question a fellow inmate posed to Alexandre Donat, author of *The Holocaust Kingdom*: "How can Christianity survive the discovery that after a thousand years of its being Europe's official religion, Europe remains pagan at heart?"<sup>2</sup> For even a Jewish scholar such as Uriel Tal, who argues strongly for the role played by secular (and anti-Christian) anti-Semitism in the genesis of Nazism, still underscores the pivotal contribution of the Christian tradition:

The anti-Christian elements of racial anti-Semitism were interpreted in such a way that the traditional theological concepts of Christianity were not completely rejected; only their meanings were changed by using a pseudoscientific jargon and applied to the historical realities of that day, without the salutary correction of Christian discipline and belief.

Racial anti-Semitism and the subsequent Nazi movement were not the result of mass hysteria or the work of single propagandists. The racial anti-Semites, despite their antagonism toward traditional Christianity, learned much from it, and succeeded in producing a well-prepared, systematic ideology with a logic of its own that reached its culmination in the Third Reich.<sup>3</sup>

Not raising the specific issues involved with the Christian response to the Holocaust itself is in no way meant to imply that they are of secondary concern or now even irrelevant. They are absolutely crucial. And thus I would feel it presumptuous for any Christian to dare treat the overarching moral questions without first having addressed directly the question of Christian culpability during the Holocaust itself. Having tried to be faithful to this responsibility in other writings, I would like to devote my attention in the following pages to the more generalized and pervasive moral issues.

#### FACING A NEW HUMAN CONDITION

The face of Auschwitz has emerged for me as the face of a significantly new era. The mass extermination of human life in a guiltless fashion became thinkable and technologically feasible. The door was now ajar for an era when dispassionate torture and murder of millions could become not merely the acts of crazed despots, not merely an irrational outbreak of xenophobic fear, not just a desire for national security, but a calculated effort to reshape history supported by intellectual argumentation from the best and brightest minds in a society. It was an attempt, Emil Fackenheim has said, to wipe out the "divine image" in history. "The murder camp," Fackenheim insists, "was not an accidental by-product of the Nazi empire. It was its essence."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1965, 230-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Christians and Jews in Germany* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1975) 305.

<sup>4</sup> *The Jewish Return into History* (New York: Schocken, 1978) 246.

For me the fundamental challenge of the Holocaust lies in our altered perception of the relationship between God and humanity and its implications for the basis of moral behavior. What emerges as a central reality from the study of the Holocaust is the Nazi attempt to create the "superperson," to develop a truly liberated humanity, to be shared in only by a select number (i.e., the Aryan race). The new humanity would be free of the moral restraints imposed by previous religious beliefs and would be capable of exerting virtually unlimited power in the shaping of the world and its inhabitants. God was dead as an effective force in governing the universe. To attain their objective, the Nazis were convinced that the "dregs of humanity" had to be eliminated or at least their influence on culture and human development greatly curtailed. The Jews fell into this category first and foremost. They were classified as "vermin." But the Poles, the Gypsies, gay people, and the mentally/physically incapacitated were looked upon as polluters of humanity, as obstacles to the growth of human consciousness to a new level of insight and power. Their extermination under the rubric of humankind's purification assumes a theological significance intimately related to the Jewish question. Regretably, the non-Jewish side of the Holocaust has not entered the theological reflections of either Christian or Jewish theologians up till now.

The Israeli historian Uriel Tal has captured as well as anyone the basic moral challenge of the Shoah, the "annihilation," the increasingly preferable term for the event. The so-called Final Solution, he says, aimed at a total transformation of human values. Its stated goal was the complete liberation of humanity from previous moral ideals and codes. When the Nazi program had reached its terminus, humanity would no longer feel itself bound by the shackles of a God concept and its linked notions of moral responsibility, redemption, sin, and revelation. Nazi ideology sought to transform theological ideas into anthropological and political concepts alone. As Tal has put it,

God became man, but not in the theological New Testament sense of the Incarnation of the word . . . or in accordance with Paul's understanding of the Incarnation of God in Christ in whom "the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). In the new conception, God becomes man in a political sense as a member of the Aryan race whose highest representative on earth is the Führer.<sup>5</sup>

Tal describes this Nazi consciousness as developing gradually in the period after World War I. Its roots were buried in the process of social secularization that was affecting the life of Germany. This process

<sup>5</sup> "Forms of Pseudo-Religion in the German *Kulturbereich* Prior to the Holocaust," *Immanuel* 3 (winter 1973-74) 69.

commenced, Tal argues, "with the negation of the historical revealed religions in the teachings of the deists, the forerunners of the rationalists like Voltaire and the French encyclopedists of the eighteenth century, and culminated in the transformation of religion into anthropology associated with the name of Feuerbach."<sup>6</sup> Further contributors to this transformation of communal ethos included the anthropologically oriented Young Hegelians (e.g., Max Sturmer and Bruno Bauer), the romantic writers who reached back into pagan mythology for usable social symbols, the evolutionists with their positive views of nature, and the new generation of scientists who through their escalating discoveries left the impression to many that a triumphant material civilization was dawning. In the end, Tal concludes, "these intellectual and social movements struck a responsive chord in a rebellious generation, altered the traditional views of God, man, and society, and ultimately led to the pseudoreligious, pseudomessianic movement of Nazism."<sup>7</sup>

#### THE HOLOCAUST'S BASIC THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

The primal theological problem posed by the Holocaust for contemporary religious understanding is how to deal with this sense of human liberation that lay at the heart of Nazi ideology. The Nazis were correct in at least one respect. They rightly perceived that some basic changes were underway in human consciousness. The impact of the new science and technology, with its underlying philosophy of freedom, was beginning to provide humankind on a mass scale with a Promethean-type experience of escape from prior bonds. People were starting to recognize a greater sense of dignity and autonomy than most of Western Christian theology had previously conceded, with concepts such as divine punishment, hell, the wrath of God, divine providence, and the like losing some of the hold they exercised over people since biblical times. Christian theology had tended to accentuate the omnipotence of God, which in turn intensified the impotence of the human person and his/her inconsequential role in the governance of the earth. The Nazis were saying no to this previous relationship, trying literally to turn it on its head.

The Protestant theologian Michael D. Ryan emphasizes this direction of Nazism in his theological analysis of *Mein Kampf*. What is striking with regard to the Hitlerian "salvation history" in the eyes of Ryan is that it confines itself absolutely to the limits of time:

It amounted to a resignation to the conditions of finitude, while at the same time asserting total power for itself within those conditions. This is what makes the logic of *Mein Kampf* theological. By asserting total control within the limits of

<sup>6</sup> *Christians and Jews* 302-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

finitude, Hitler deified himself and made himself into the Savior of the German people.<sup>8</sup>

Ryan insists that Hitler's worldview

amounted to the deliberate decision on the part of mass man to live within the limits of finitude without either the moral restraints or the hopes of traditional religion—in this case, Christianity. That is the final implication of the content of the *fides quae* of Hitler. The challenge to Christian faith could not have been more direct.<sup>9</sup>

The task for Christian theology after the Holocaust, as for Jewish theology, will be to discover a way whereby the new sense of human freedom that is continuing to dawn might be affirmed but channeled into constructive rather than humanly destructive purposes. The understanding of the relationship between God and the human person must be significantly altered in light of the study of the Holocaust. The intensified sense of power and human elevation that the Nazis recognized as a *novum* of our age needs to be acknowledged for what it is: a crucial and inescapable part of the process of human salvation. There is no turning back this changed divine-human relationship. That is why the mere repetition of biblical precepts, of the biblical view of God's relationship with His creation, will not suffice as a response to the Holocaust. Contemporary humanity finds itself in a "freer" situation relative to God than its biblical counterpart. People today perceive dimensions to the Genesis notion of cocreatorship which far exceed the consciousness of the biblical world.

The challenge before us, then, is whether post-Holocaust theology can articulate an understanding of God and religion which will prevent the newly recognized creative power of humanity from being transformed into the destructive force unveiled in all its ugliness in the Shoah. Looking at it from the perspective of ethics, the fundamental question before us is whether post-Holocaust humanity can discover a relationship with God which will morally ground the use of its vast new power to shape itself and the creation it has inherited. This is a fundamental issue that most ethicists have skirted up till now.

#### JEWISH THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE HOLOCAUST

Reflections on the divine-human relationship in light of the Holocaust have emerged in the last decade as one of the central theological discus-

<sup>8</sup> "Hitler's Challenge to the Churches: A Theological-Political Analysis of *Mein Kampf*," in Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds., *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1973) 160-61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

sions in Judaism. Unfortunately, as David Tracy has so rightly said, the same has not generally happened in Christian theology:

... the ultimate theological issue, the understanding of God, has yet to receive much reflection from Catholic theologians. And yet, as Schleiermacher correctly insisted, the doctrine of God can never be "another" doctrine for theology, but must pervade all doctrines. Here Jewish theology, in its reflections on the reality of God since the *Tremendum* of the Holocaust, has led the way for all serious reflection.<sup>10</sup>

It is to meet Tracy's challenge in at least a minimal way that I now turn to an examination of representative Jewish voices on the question. Several Jewish scholars, mostly representing the Orthodox tradition, have tried to downplay any ultimate theological significance for Auschwitz, although in so doing they in no way mean to belittle the terrible suffering the people Israel experienced during this darkest of periods in human history. Such an approach is found in David Hartman, Eliezer Berkovits, and Michael Wyschogrod. Hartman's words summarize well the general thrust of their position: "Auschwitz, like all Jewish suffering of the past, must be absorbed and understood within the normative framework of Sinai. We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai."<sup>11</sup>

From the side of Reform Judaism Eugene B. Borowitz has recently argued that the central theological problem for Jewish theology remains the one identified by Reform Judaism for nearly a century: human autonomy. Although he acknowledges that the Holocaust has led a minority of Jews to search for new meaning through a fresh encounter with the Jewish classical and mystical sources, he insists that for him

... personal autonomy has emerged as the most fundamental intellectual theme. Other thinkers believe that accommodating Judaism to science or the Holocaust or the State of Israel ought to be our major conceptual focus. For all their importance, I would argue that none of these issues deserves priority over the need to clarify the meaning and practice of personal self-determination within the people of Israel's continuing Covenant relationship with God.<sup>12</sup>

I stand in partial sympathy with these Jewish theologians. Even after the Holocaust our faith expression today must be strongly rooted in the

<sup>10</sup> "Religious Values after the Holocaust: A Catholic View," in Abraham J. Peck, ed., *Jews and Christians after the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 101.

<sup>11</sup> "New Jewish Religious Voices II: Auschwitz or Sinai?" *Ecumenist* 21, no. 1 (November/December 1982) 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide* (New York: Behrman House, 1983) 256.

covenantal experience and promises. But I believe they have seriously underestimated the degree to which the Holocaust forces us to readjust some of our understanding of our biblical heritage. The Shoah is not merely the most gruesome and troubling example of the classical theological problem of evil. To stop there in probing the Holocaust is, in my judgment, to endanger our humanity. For we will fail to appreciate fully enough the degree of power and consequent responsibility that has come into our hands. And not to attain such realization may allow this power to pass once again into the hands of new Hitlers. The frontispiece to Alexander Donat's *The Holocaust Kingdom*, a quotation from Revelation 6:8, reminds us of that continuing potential: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth."

In one sense I strongly agree with Borowitz that human autonomy constitutes a central, if not the central, problem for a moral theology today. It is unfortunate that Borowitz fails to make the deep connection between this problem of human autonomy and the new realities regarding the divine-human relationship that emerge from the experience of the Holocaust.

Among those Jewish scholars who have argued for major theological reinterpretation, the following names stand out: Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg, and Arthur Cohen. It was Rubenstein who got the ball rolling. His volume *After Auschwitz*<sup>13</sup> caused a great stir in Jewish circles. For he claimed that the Holocaust had buried any possible notion of a God of history. The traditional notion of a God in covenant with the Jewish people no longer had any credibility after the immensity of suffering endured by the supposedly covenanted Jewish people. In place of traditional belief in the God of history Rubenstein offered contemporary Judaism a new creed. "I am now a pagan," he said. And becoming a "pagan" means finding

once again one's roots as a child of earth and to see one's own existence as wholly and totally an earthly existence. It means once again to understand that for mankind the true divinities are the gods of earth, not the high gods of time; the gods of home and hearth, not the gods of wandering, though wanderers we must be. Though every single establishment Jewish theologian rejects this position, the Jewish people have given their assent—with their feet. They have gone home. The best part of that people has ceased to be wanderers. They have once again

<sup>13</sup> Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966.

found a place of their own on this earth. That is paganism.<sup>14</sup>

Rubenstein no doubt made an immense contribution in warning us that classical categories of evil simply do not work relative to the divine-human relationship when confronted by the Holocaust. Many who significantly disagree with the paganism answer of *After Auschwitz*, such as Steven Katz, consider him "absolutely correct in this judgment."<sup>15</sup> Rubenstein must also be credited with dramatically calling us back to our earthly roots, the first and indispensable step towards the development of a theology of human power adequate for our responsibilities after the Shoah. But Rubenstein's new earthliness is insufficient by itself. Accompanying it there must be the recovery of a fresh sense of transcendence, a new appreciation of the centrality of the divine-human encounter for continued survival. Devoid of such a sense of transcendence, the more powerful dimensions of human creativity we have stumbled across during the last two centuries will inevitably lead to the hideousness witnessed in the Holocaust. Without it we will fail to achieve the new moral consciousness that proper control of enhanced human power desperately requires in our time.

Before proceeding to an examination of the three Jewish theologians who have positioned themselves between Rubenstein and those who deny theological centrality to the Holocaust, let me offer a glimpse of my personal perspective on the issue of the relationship between God and the human person after Auschwitz as a way of showing why I think it important, as David Tracy also does, for the Christian theologian or ethicist to constructively engage their thought. It needs to be said, contrary to Rubenstein, that many dimensions of the covenantal concept of God found in the Scriptures continue intact after the Holocaust: God remains Creator, He remains Judge to some degree, He remains our loving Parent. Put another way, humanity's perception of its relationship with God after the Shoah will need fundamental revision, but not total reconstruction. The revision will have to come in the area of our understanding of the depth of human freedom and the extent of the power God has graciously shared with His creation. The cry of the believer in the post-Holocaust age may indeed be that of D. H. Lawrence: "God of Justice, when wilt Thou teach them to save themselves?"<sup>16</sup> God will not simply step in and stop massive human destruction. Rubenstein is right. Any belief in that kind of interventionist God of history was buried in

<sup>14</sup> "Some Perspectives on Religious Faith after Auschwitz," in Littell and Locke, *The German Church Struggle* 267.

<sup>15</sup> *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University, 1983) 176.

<sup>16</sup> *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1967) 144.



the ashes of the Holocaust. Stopping such destruction is now clearly the burden of the human community. Humanity must learn to save itself from future instances of holocaust, nuclear or otherwise. We no longer have the luxury, in fact it would be the height of human irresponsibility after the Holocaust, to imagine that God will do it in response to simple petitions of prayer. Perhaps because of the freedom He has granted humanity He cannot do it. As part of our search for a meaningful notion of God after Auschwitz, one that would heighten our role in human salvation, we may need to explore such traditional sources as the notion of divine self-constriction in the act of creation that is present in Jewish mystical literature.

The position I am taking admittedly represents a fundamental shift from the biblical viewpoint, from the viewpoint of Christian tradition as well. For both tended to place the onus of salvation and the power of salvation decidedly on God. After the Holocaust salvation has become very much of a shared ideal in which God and humanity must both responsibly exercise their role. The healing and motivating energy of divine love remains an absolutely indispensable component, as do the hands of humanity.

Greenberg, Fackenheim, and Cohen are well aware, despite differences of approach among them, that restatement of the God-human relationship is at the heart of new faith-meaning after the Shoah. All attempts at post-Holocaust theology, at post-Holocaust moral affirmation, must work their way through such restatement. On this point they speak with unified voice.

In his volume *The Jewish Return into History* Fackenheim states that the restoration of the divine image, but an image of God that bespeaks curtailed power in comparison with past images, depends on the testimony to life by the human community, the Holocaust survivors in particular. None of this is possible, says Fackenheim, without the prior realization that the image of God was destroyed during the Shoah. He writes:

A Jew cannot take upon himself the age-old task of testifying to the divine image in man without believing his own testimony. In our time, however, he cannot authentically believe in this testimony without exposing himself *both* to the fact that the image of God was destroyed, *and* to the fact that the unsurpassable attempt to destroy it was successfully resisted, supremely so, by the survivor. *Hence the wish to bear witness turns into a commandment, the commandment to restore the divine image to the limits of his power.*<sup>17</sup>

Irving Greenberg's language about the effects of the Holocaust on the

<sup>17</sup> New York: Schocken, 1978, 251.

divine image are not as blunt as that of Fackenheim, but he shares the conviction that a major readjustment is demanded of how we understand the force of the covenantal obligations upon humanity in light of Auschwitz. "The Nazis," he says, "unleashed all-out violence against the covenant . . ." Their program for the Final Solution involved a total assault on Jewish life and values. For Greenberg, "the degree of success of this attack constitutes a fundamental contradiction to the covenant of life and redemption."<sup>18</sup>

The reality of the Nazi fury forces a thorough reconsideration of the nature of moral obligation upon the contemporary Jewish community and seemingly by implication upon all those other believers (Christians and Muslims) who in some way regard the Sinai covenant as foundational for their faith expression. For this covenant has called Jews as "witnesses to the world for God and for a final perfection." "In light of the Holocaust," insists Greenberg, "it is obvious that this role opened the Jews to a murderous fury from which there was no escape. Yet the Divine could not or would not save them from this fate. Therefore, morally speaking, God must repent of the covenant, i.e., do *teshuvah* for having given his chosen people a task that was unbearably cruel and dangerous without having provided for their protection. Morally speaking, then, God can have no claims on the Jews by dint of the covenant."<sup>19</sup>

The end result of any serious reflection on the Sinai covenant in light of the Holocaust experience, as Greenberg sees it, is simply the disappearance of any "commanded" dimension on the part of God. "Covenantally speaking, one cannot *order* another to step forward to die."<sup>20</sup> Any understanding of the covenantal obligations must now be voluntary:

One cannot *order* another to go on a suicide mission. Out of shared values, one can only ask for volunteers. Similarly, God can no longer enforce or educate for the covenant by punishment. The most horrifying of the curses and punishments threatened in the Torah for failing to live up to the covenant pale by comparison with what was done in the Holocaust. . . . No divine punishment can enforce the covenant, for there is no risked punishment so terrible that it can match the punishment risked by continuing faithfulness to the covenant. If the Jews keep the covenant after the Holocaust, then it can no longer be for the reason that it is commanded or because it is enforced by reward or punishment.<sup>21</sup>

The voluntary nature of the post-Holocaust covenantal relationship unquestionably heightens human responsibility in the eyes of Greenberg:

<sup>18</sup> "The Voluntary Covenant," *Perspectives* 3 (New York: National Jewish Resource Center, 1982) 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

If after the Temple's destruction, Israel moved from junior participant to true partner in the covenant, then after the Holocaust, the Jewish people is called upon to become the senior partner in action. In effect, God was saying to humans: you stop the Holocaust. You bring the redemption. You act to ensure that it will never again occur. I will be with you totally in whatever you do, wherever you go, whatever happens, but you must do it.<sup>22</sup>

Not all Jews have taken kindly to Greenberg's proclamation of the voluntary covenant after the Holocaust, even those with a long record of social activism. Reform social critic Rabbi Arnold Wolf has called this proclamation "the novel heresy of the twentieth century" that may breed unwanted chauvinism within the Jewish community. He regards the burial of the divine-command dimension of covenant by Greenberg as a bold denial of a central Jewish view. Wolf believes that Greenberg has unraveled Jewish self-understanding in a detrimental fashion: "We are the center of the covenant. We have the primary task of self-protection . . . We are the makers and unmakers of the *mitzvot*, since our existence is already a fulfillment of them all. We define the terms on which we are willing to survive. We do what we choose, not what God chooses . . ." <sup>23</sup>

There is a kernel of truth to Wolf's critique, even though I am convinced that Greenberg remains fundamentally on the right track. I will return to this critique shortly.

Let me now turn for a moment to a third Jewish figure, Arthur Cohen, who has also called for a major reworking of our notion of how God and the human community interact after the Holocaust. Cohen's *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*<sup>24</sup> has its roots in Gershom Scholem's interpretation of Lurianic kabbalism and in the theodicy model of the *mysterium tremendum* developed by the Christian writer Rudolph Otto in his *The Idea of the Holy*. Other sources of influence include Franz Rosenzweig, Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling, and the Rhineland mystic Jakob Boehme. In a response to Richard Rubenstein's review essay of *The Tremendum*, Cohen argues that, in light of the Holocaust, theodicy must deal with two *tremenda* in this world. To ignore either is to distort reality.

If the Holocaust of this century is an immensity, an event that alters our reading of the irrational eruptions of human society into upheavals of grotesque evil and compels us to assert of human action a capacity for systemic, radical evil, something new has occurred. To speak of human evil in this century as a human *tremendum*, a countervalance to the divine *tremendum*, is to propose not merely

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 17–18.

<sup>23</sup> "The Revisionism of Irving Greenberg," *Sh'ma* 13, no. 254 (May 13, 1983) 105–6.

<sup>24</sup> New York: Crossroad, 1981.

a literary device, but a categorical assertion about the implication of unbounded freedom, of freedom infinitized. That freedom yields the abyss of the *tremendum*, a force as powerful as the divine transcendence that appears to us out of the whirlwind of God's own *mysterium tremendum*.<sup>25</sup>

Cohen's response to the reality of the two *tremenda* is to assert the absolute necessity for the divine *tremendum* to counter the destructive potential of human evil. But for this to happen, we cannot approach God in totally traditional fashion. "God's entanglement in our history is deeper and more subtle than familiar and conventional theology construes it,"<sup>26</sup> he tells us in the same response to Rubenstein. Gone are the days when we could comfortably picture God as the strategist of human history. The Holocaust has undercut any such model of the divine-human entanglement. Post-Auschwitz God can legitimately be perceived (and must be perceived if radical evil is to remain in check) as

the mystery of our futurity, always our *posse*, never our acts. If we can begin to see God less as an interferer whose insertion is welcome (when it accords with our needs) and more as the immensity whose reality is our prefiguration, whose speech and silence are metaphors for our language and distortion, whose plenitude and unfolding are the hope of our futurity, we shall have won a sense of God whom we may love and honor, but whom we no longer fear and from whom we no longer demand.<sup>27</sup>

#### POST-HOLOCAUST JEWISH REFLECTIONS ON GOD AND CHRISTIAN MORALITY

My basic response to the post-Holocaust reflections of Fackenheim, Greenberg, and Cohen is that, despite some reservations, they provide the basic context in which I as a Christian ethicist must work today. David Tracy has taken a similar position relative to theological hermeneutics after the Holocaust.<sup>28</sup> For one thing, the role of the human community in keeping history free of further eruptions of radical evil akin to Nazism is strongly enhanced, as all three have insisted. In exercising this new responsibility, humanity will be helping to restore the divine image, as Fackenheim has suggested. The human role in the process of salvation has been upgraded by leaps and bounds. Humanity finds itself after the Holocaust facing the realization that "future" is no longer something God will guarantee. Survival, whether for the people

<sup>25</sup> "On Theological Method: A Response on Behalf of The Tremendum," *Journal of Reform Judaism* 31, no. 2 (spring 1984) 64.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>27</sup> *The Tremendum* 97.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. "The Interpretation of Theological Texts after the Holocaust," unpublished lecture, International Conference on the Holocaust, Indiana University, fall 1982.

Israel or humanity at large, is now more than ever a human proposition. In their differing ways Fackenheim, Greenberg, and Cohen have made this fact abundantly clear. And we need to be profoundly grateful for that.

But despite my gratitude I must demur a bit from their approach. Here is where Wolf's criticism, though overdrawn, has a point. Has Greenberg, have Fackenheim and Cohen, left us *too* much on our own? Does God have any significant role after the Holocaust experience in the development of a moral ethos within humanity that can keep radical evil in check? I do not believe any of these Jewish writers has adequately dealt with this question. The role they have assigned to God is not potent enough, in my judgment.

The post-Holocaust theological vision must be one that recognizes both the new creative possibilities inherent in the human condition and the utter necessity that this creative potential be influenced by a genuine encounter with the living and judging God. Only such an encounter will direct the use of this creative potential away from the destruction represented by Nazism. We must find a way of articulating a notion of a transcendent God which can counterbalance the potential for evil that remains very much a live possibility in the contemporary human situation. In other words, we shall have to recover a fresh sense of transcendence to accompany our heightened sense of human responsibility after the Shoah. This is something I do not find Greenberg, Fackenheim, and Cohen addressing as yet in a persuasive way. Men and women will once more need to experience contact with a personal power beyond themselves, a power that heals the destructive tendencies still lurking within humanity. The newly liberated person, to be able to work consistently for the creation of a just and sustainable society, must begin to sense that there exists a judgment upon human endeavors that goes beyond mere human judgment. Such a sense of judgment is missing in Fackenheim's emphasis on human restoration of the divine image, in Greenberg's notion of the voluntary covenant, and in Cohen's language about God as our *posse*, as valid as each notion is in itself.

The old sense of judgment rooted in a notion of divine punishment will no longer suffice. The modern experience of the human community is that the worst atrocities can be perpetrated with apparent impunity. The only norm that can finally curb such atrocities is one rooted in an experience of love and unity beyond the narrow dimensions of this earth, joined to the concomitant realization that actions such as those that shaped the Holocaust ultimately block the attainment of such love and unity.

The Holocaust has shattered all simplistic notions of a "commanding

God." On this point I go full way with Greenberg, Cohen, and Fackenheim. Such a "commanding" God can no longer be the touchstone of ethical behavior. But the Shoah has also exposed humanity's desperate need to restore a relationship with a "compelling" God, compelling because we have experienced through symbolic encounter with this God a healing, a strengthening, an affirming that buries any need to assert our humanity through the destructive, even deadly, use of human power. This sense of a compelling Parent God who has gifted humanity, whose vulnerability for the Christian has been shown in the Cross, is the meaningful foundation for an adequate moral ethos after the Holocaust. Hence I part company to a significant degree with Greenberg, Fackenheim, and Cohen in positing this "compelling" God. I believe their approach leaves God's role too indirect. Talk of a purely voluntary covenant, of human restoration of the divine image, or of God as simply the *posse* of the human future, while all valid in their own right, may in the final analysis leave us with an overly impotent God. This seems the major point behind the Wolf critique of Greenberg, and it is one I share up to a point.

Some have suggested to me that "compelling" may be too strong a replacement for "commanding" in speaking about the post-Auschwitz God. Perhaps they are right; perhaps I have tipped the scales too much back towards a pre-Holocaust vision of God. These critics have offered the alternative of speaking about a "God to whom we are drawn," which admittedly is more cumbersome than "compelling." This inherent and perduring "drawing" power of God would substitute for pre-Holocaust models, which emphasized God's "imposition" upon humanity.

I am still inclined at this point to stay with the "compelling" vocabulary. But whatever image eventually wins the day, the basic point must be made that post-Shoah humanity needs to rediscover a permanent relationship with God, who remains a direct source of strength and influence in the conduct of human affairs.

At this point let me add that I am convinced that the kind of post-Holocaust relationship between God and humanity for which I am calling will be found primarily through liturgical encounter. I have developed this thesis much more fully in an essay originally delivered to the 1984 meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy.<sup>29</sup> For our purposes here it is sufficient to assert that unless we can begin to create liturgical experiences that make present a genuine encounter with a compelling God together with a consciousness of such realities as sin, freedom, dependence, solidarity, vulnerability, and oppression, we stand little

<sup>29</sup> "Worship after the Holocaust: An Ethician's Reflections," *Worship* 58, no. 4 (July 1984) 315-29.

chance of influencing human decision-making in a significant way. And the absence of such influence will increasingly relegate the human condition to a situation in which there exist fewer and fewer moral constraints on the use of human power which technology is enhancing day by day.

The focus on the primacy of the encounter with the compelling God through liturgy leads right into another dimension of the effort to create a post-Holocaust moral ethos in society. It is the need to recognize the significance of what Reinhold Niebuhr used to call the "vitalistic" side of the human person.

Niebuhr used the term "vitalistic" to cover the various areas of human consciousness not directly controlled by the rational faculty. It includes the faculty of feeling, the human sexual drive, and the faculty of memory and myth-making—among others. Some trends in Catholic morality were suspicious of this dimension of humanity, locating ethics primarily in people's rational capacity. Niebuhr, on other hand, insisted that reason was just as capable of generating human sinfulness as the vitalistic powers. More importantly, he stressed that no authentic and effective human ethics could be developed without the constructive involvement of vitalistic energies. The Holocaust has shown the indisputable wisdom of this Niebuhrian perspective.

The regeneration of the vitalistic side of humanity, albeit in highly destructive directions, stood at the heart of the Nazi enterprise. The Nazis became aware of the tremendous power of this vitalistic dimension, for good or for ill. This was something the West, especially in its approach to morality, had blotted out from its sphere of vision. And I am convinced that the moral honing of this vitalistic dimension of humanity can effectively take place only in the context of liturgical celebration. The failure of Enlightenment-based liberalism to provide an effective moral counterweight to the Nazi manipulation of human vitalism shows the inadequacy of any exclusively rational-based morality after the Shoah. Greenberg makes this point quite strongly, and I think he is basically correct:

How naive the nineteenth-century polemic with religion appears to be in retrospect; how simple Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and many others. The entire structure of autonomous logic and sovereign human reason now takes on a sinister character . . . . For Germany was one of the most 'advanced' Western countries—at the heart of the academic, scientific, and technological enterprise. All the talk about 'atavism' cannot obscure the way in which such behavior is the outgrowth

of democratic and modern values, as well as pagan gods.<sup>30</sup>

In light of the Holocaust we can no longer afford to give scant attention to the vitalistic dimension of humanity, to reduce it simply to the realm of play and recreation. The development of moral reasoning remains crucial; but it is no substitute for the healing of the destructive tendencies in humanity's vitalistic side which require symbolic encounter with a loving God.

The discussion of the centrality of the vitalistic dimension of the human person brings to the fore another key issue: Where do we locate divine activity in the world today? Arthur Cohen has hinted, as we saw above, that divine involvement in human affairs may be more subtle than we once thought. The Holocaust has rendered any belief about direct divine intervention in history obsolete. But we are not left with simply a deist version of the divine. Where we must look is the realm of human consciousness, the realm of the vitalistic. That is why Cohen's approach to post-Holocaust theodicy, rooted as it is in the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions, may be closer to adequacy than Fackenheim's or Greenberg's. God retains the potential for profound influence on human history. But His influence comes primarily through involvement with human consciousness, with the healing of destructive tendencies, and with the strengthening of creative energies in the realm of human vitality. Humanity is the agent of God in human history. People are the link between God and history. But if we understand the intimate bond between human consciousness and the shaping of the political, cultural, and economic configurations of human history, we will come to appreciate that though God's involvement in human history in light of the Shoah needs to be understood as mediated, it remains crucial and profoundly real; it remains basic to any comprehensive theory of morality.

#### OTHER MORAL-THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Let me now go on to two interrelated issues, in some ways really two aspects of a single issue. They flow directly from what I have said thus far. The first is the question of divine vulnerability in light of the Holocaust, especially as this notion has been advanced by Jürgen Moltmann in his volume *The Crucified God*.<sup>31</sup> He interprets Auschwitz as the most dramatic revelation to date of the fundamental meaning of the Christ event: God can save people, including Israel, because through the Cross he participated in their suffering. To theologize after the Holocaust

<sup>30</sup> "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust," in Eva Fleischer, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York: Ktav, 1977) 17.

<sup>31</sup> New York: Harper & Row, 1977.



would prove a futile enterprise in Moltmann's view

...were not the *Sch'ma Israel* and the Lord's Prayer prayed in Auschwitz itself, were not God himself in Auschwitz, suffering with the martyred and murdered. Every other answer would be blasphemy. An absolute God would make us indifferent. The God of action and success would let us forget the dead, which we still cannot forget. God as nothingness would make the entire world into a concentration camp.<sup>32</sup>

I have some significant reservations about Moltmann's articulation of the theology of divine vulnerability emerging from the Holocaust. Some of them I share with my colleague A. Roy Eckardt. These reservations are outlined in some other writings of mine.<sup>33</sup> There is one dimension of Moltmann's notion of divine vulnerability, however, that I find absolutely crucial for the development of moral theory today. God's self-imposed limitation as manifested in the Cross is vital to the human healing required for an overcoming of the primal sin of pride. It was this sinful drive that lay at the heart of the Nazi millennial quest for power. An appreciation of divine vulnerability may help humanity finally overcome the radical evil that continues to lurk in the depths of human consciousness. It will help to neutralize perennial attempts by humanity to supplant the Creator God, the Holocaust being the most devastating example. For it will no longer seem "ungodly" to express dependence upon others—the Creator has done it. The full maturity vital for the humane exercise of humanity's enhanced corollary role unveiled in the Holocaust requires the assertion of this interdependence to which the Nazis were blind.

Moltmann's notion of divine vulnerability helps greatly in the effort to scale down past theories which exaggerated divine omnipotence in the shaping of human affairs at the expense of humanity's role. This is a "reduction" of divine initiative and an upgrading of human responsibility that Fackenheim, Cohen, and Greenberg have rightly highlighted. But as Arnold Wolf has perceptively warned, the combination of a reduced divine role and a heightened human role could result in a morally disastrous form of chauvinism. Here is where we now need to move to an issue interrelated with divine vulnerability: renewed humility on the part of the post-Auschwitz human community.

The Nazis clearly believed they had become the final arbiters of right and wrong. This new sense of freedom, this growing Prometheus-un-

<sup>32</sup> "The Crucified God," *Theology Today* 31, no. 1 (April 1974) 9.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Christ in Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1982) 137-39. For Eckardt's views cf. "Jürgen Moltmann, the Holocaust People, and the Holocaust," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (December 1976) 670-85.

bound experience, in Western society, when coupled with unresolved identity problems relative to the Creator God, resulted in a catastrophic plan for human destruction. The ultimate assertion of human freedom from God in our time represented by the Shoah may in fact prove the beginning of the final resolution of the conflict. When humanity finally recognizes the destruction it can produce when it totally rejects its Creator, as it did in the Holocaust, when it recognizes such rejection as a perversion and not an affirmation of human freedom, a new stage in human consciousness may be on the horizon. We may finally be positioning ourselves to come to grips with evil at its roots, the centuries-long struggle of the human community to work out its identity by overpowering God. The power of evil will permanently wane only when humankind accompanies its elevated sense of human dignity with an equivalent sense of humility occasioned by a searching encounter with the devastation it is capable of producing when left to its own wits. A sense of profound humility evoked by the experience of the healing power present in the ultimate Creator of human power—this is crucial. On this point of humility as a critical response to Auschwitz I join with ethicist Stanley Hauerwas in his reflections on the Holocaust, even though we part company on several implications of the event.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, Hauerwas fails to take seriously enough the human cocreational role after the Holocaust. So even though we agree on the need for humility to assume a central role in post-Auschwitz human self-consciousness, this failure could prove negatively decisive, inhibiting humanity from taking up the governance of human affairs that the Holocaust demands now more than ever. Hauerwas' emphasis on humility without enhanced responsibility could result in people of faith becoming bystanders rather than central actors in human history. When he says that "What we require is not a god that underwrites our pretensions, but is capable of calling us from our false notions of power and control,"<sup>35</sup> I can only nod assent. The God with which Cohen, Greenberg, and Fackenheim have so far left us is insufficiently such a "calling" God. But this is not the full reality facing post-Holocaust humanity. The full reality includes the realization that power and control have entered human capacity at unprecedented levels. The choice before us is not use or nonuse of this new capacity. To refuse to use this new capacity would prove just as dangerous for humanity as to employ it with "false notions of power and control." The real challenge is the humanization of this enhanced capacity through a new encounter with the healing God, who remains in the ultimate sense the source of any power residing in human hands. The

<sup>34</sup> "Jews and Christians among the Nations," *Cross Currents* 31 (spring 1981) 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

exercise of such power in a spirit of profound humility—that is what is called for after Auschwitz, not merely the shortsighted relinquishment of power in the name of false humility.

The final issue I would raise relative to ethics after the Holocaust has to do with the demand for a new appreciation for the significance of history. David Tracy has written of late how much reflection on the Holocaust has personally convinced him of this need and of the necessity to alter his own theological position:

We Christian theologians have honestly come to terms with historical consciousness and historicity; we have developed a theological hermeneutics where the subject matter—the event itself—is once again allowed to rule in theological hermeneutic; we have recognized the Sach-Kritik that the religious event itself demands. But we have not returned to history—the real, concrete thing where events like the Holocaust have happened, where events like the state of Israel do exist.<sup>36</sup>

Tracy then goes on to praise liberation theologians for being one of the few groups of Christian theologians who have indeed begun to treat history with the seriousness it deserves, though he faults them for not relating their thought to the Holocaust experience. He likewise identifies with Greenberg's and Fackenheim's call for a return to history.

I applaud Tracy's confession of his hermeneutical conversion. What it means from my perspective as an ethicist is that ethics must now stand at the center of any authentic systematic theology. Ethics is not merely a practical discipline. "The central theological question today," Tracy argues with the Holocaust uppermost in his mind, "is not the question of the non-believer but the question of the non-person—those forgotten ones, living and dead, whose struggle and memory is our history."<sup>37</sup> This is what the liberation theologians have clearly brought to the forefront of Christian theological consciousness. After the Holocaust the ethical implications of all systematic theological statement must be clearly articulated, for this event truly confronted us with a systematic, repeatable attempt to designate entire categories of people as nonpersons.

Recently Johann Baptist Metz has also begun to explore this dimension of the Holocaust experience. While his thinking still remains embryonic relative to the Shoah, Metz has said without equivocation that any statement of Christian theodicy, any attempt to express meaning, must be considered "blasphemy" if it does not meet the test of this historical event. For Metz *salvation* within Christian theology must be interpreted primarily as alliance with Jews within history:

<sup>36</sup> "The Interpretation of Theological Texts" 16–17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

But this means that we Christians for our own sakes are from now on assigned to the victims of Auschwitz—assigned, in fact, in an alliance belonging to the heart of *saving history*, provided the word “history” in this Christian expression is to have a definite meaning and not just serve as a screen for a triumphalist metaphysic of salvation which never learns from catastrophes nor finds in them a cause for conversion. . . .<sup>38</sup>

Thus for Metz too, after the Holocaust, ethics must be seen as integral, not merely consequential, in Christian theology.

There is one reservation I have in connection with the Tracy/Metz call for the return to history after Auschwitz. This return to history must be accompanied by new explorations into human consciousness, especially the extent to which it harbors the roots of power and evil. There is not yet an adequate link established by either Tracy/Metz or Greenberg/Fackenheim between history and human consciousness. We cannot ignore the Freud/Jung revolution in understanding the Holocaust. On this score Cohen may have greater possibilities than the others. His weakness—and it is one that Tracy seems to miss in his preface to *The Tremendum* and his other writings on Cohen—is Cohen’s failure to call for a return to history in the same fashion as Greenberg and Fackenheim. An adequate ethic after the Holocaust will require a new appreciation of the profound link between history and human consciousness with respect to both human and divine activity.

Connected to the “return to history” issue is the matter of power, which neither the Christians nor the Jews with whom we have been dealing have yet satisfactorily explored. Greenberg has probably been the most direct in positing the relationship between power and the Holocaust. “Power inescapably corrupts,” he writes, “but its assumption is inescapable after the Holocaust.” In Greenberg’s perspective it would be immoral to abandon the quest for power. The only option in the post-Holocaust world, if we are to avoid further repetitions of the human degradation and evil of the Nazi period, is to combine the assumption of power with what Greenberg calls the creation of “better mechanisms of self-criticism, correction and repentance.” Only in this way can we utilize power “without being the unwitting slaves of bloodshed or an exploitative status quo.”<sup>39</sup>

I share Greenberg’s conviction that a central implication of the return to history demanded by the Holocaust is the willingness to use power. Thus, for me, a meaningful Christian ethic cannot simply reject the use of power in principle, though it certainly may decide that certain config-

<sup>38</sup> *The Emergent Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 19–20.

<sup>39</sup> “The Third Great Cycle in Jewish History,” *Perspectives 2* (New York: National Jewish Resource Center, 1981) 24–25.

urations of power (e.g., nuclear weaponry) are totally immoral even when the threat of human survival looms large. Nonetheless, those of us engaged in post-Holocaust reflection on theology and ethics need to probe this question more deeply. Our context for doing so must be the prophetic warning issued by the Catholic philosopher Romano Guardini soon after the Nazi experience:

In the coming epoch, the essential problem will no longer be that of increasing power—though power will continue to increase at an even swifter tempo—but of curbing it. The core of the new epoch's intellectual task will be to integrate power into life in such a way that man can employ power without forfeiting his humanity, or to surrender his humanity to power and perish.<sup>40</sup>

Such, then, are some of the major issues arising for a Christian ethicist in dialogue with leading Jewish commentators on the Holocaust. The questions I have considered do not exhaust the possibilities that might arise, but they remain central questions that cannot be avoided. Such dialogue, reflecting the salvific alliance, the alliance of Messianic hope, for which Metz has called, needs to continue in the future for the ongoing moral health of both Christianity and Judaism.

<sup>40</sup> *Power and Responsibility* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961) xiii.