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NATURALISM, RATIONALISM AND JEWISH FAITH

Despite the gratifying growth of many fields of Jewish learning in recent decades, the important area of Jewish thought has been sadly neglected. There are hardly any contemporary works in Jewish philosophy and theology that begin to equal in scope and depth the great studies that have appeared in such fields as rabbinics and Jewish history. Though we live in an age when all religious faith is under fire, and when Judaism, in particular, is little known or understood, very few serious books have appeared which analyze, explicate, and defend the fundamentals of Jewish faith. One of the small number of serious scholars in this field is Professor Emil Fackenheim whose penetrating essays in Jewish philosophy and theology have been published during the past twenty years in various learned journals and general periodicals. The appearance of these studies in a single volume* is an important and welcome event.

Though they appeared during a span of two decades, and though

they deal with a variety of subjects, the essays are unified by their concern with a central theme, namely, the explication of the foundations of Jewish faith. Fackenheim remains even today a product of his liberal background in many respects, but he came early to the conclusion that, in its extreme versions, liberal Judaism is indefensible. His deepest objection is that it is not really Judaism at all, but rationalism and scientific naturalism with a dash of Jewish flavor. A first requisite for any legitimate version of Judaism is that it should give primacy to the sources of the Jewish tradition and that it should judge the values of any society and the doctrines of any competing faith or philosophy by purely Jewish standards. Instead, the radical reformers reversed the order, judging and evaluating classical Jewish faith by the philosophic and scientific standards that were dominant in their own time. Fackenheim notes that what they created could no longer be recognized as authentically Jewish at all. "At one time,"

*Fackenheim, Emil L., *Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology*, (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1968).

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he tells us, "the great question may have been how to make Judaism modern. Today, the great question is how to save it as Judaism." An authentic Jewish theology must have as its primary and authoritative sources of religious insight the classical Jewish texts and the substance of Jewish historical experience. Nothing less will produce specifically Jewish religious thought.

In addition, Fackenheim rejects the religiously destructive claims which follow from extreme rationalism and naturalism. He has profound regard for reason and for the natural sciences, and he affirms unhesitatingly his own strong commitment to the way of reason and science. Yet, he is emphatic in his vigorous opposition to the view that reason and natural science are in themselves sufficient to provide answers to man's ultimate questions. He admires science, but not scientism, and has regard for a "critical rationalism which knows what it is doing," but not for "a rationalism expanded into uncritical dogma." The limits of reason are not necessarily the limits of reality, nor are the boundaries of the empirically verifiable the boundaries of what can be known. The deepest human concerns, those to which religious faith speaks, transcend discursive reason and empirical verification. In confronting the ultimate questions, we must seek out the illumination of faith. In Fackenheim's view, "Faith may be defined as the sole positive answer to questions of ultimate importance, the asking of which is still reason's prerogative, but which reason is no longer able

to answer." Any version of Judaism which is historically and theologically sound must rest on this faith which transcends the limits of rationalism and naturalism, otherwise it will be neither legitimately Jewish nor legitimately religious. Professor Fackenheim protests repeatedly against those reductions of Judaism which have robbed it of religious depth and stripped it of its historical roots. "Our naturalists and rationalists thought to improve Judaism; they made it more 'systematic' and 'scientific.' As becomes ever clearer today, they sucked the life out of it, and transformed profound insights of religious existence into platitudes."

That version of liberal Judaism which rests primarily on rationalism and naturalism emerged in an intellectual climate which posed seemingly irrefutable challenges to the ancestral faith. Radical reform was a serious attempt to save Judaism by purifying it of those beliefs and practices which were no longer acceptable in an enlightened scientific age. Now, a century later, we live in an even more naturalistic climate. How, then, does Professor Fackenheim propose that we should return to the traditional Jewish non-naturalistic and trans-rational position of faith? It is obvious that neither he nor most of his readers are prepared to give up modern science. They accept its factual claims and consider its theoretical foundations to be sound. Neither are we ready to give up philosophical claims concerning the reliability of reason and the existence of a fixed rational world order. How, then, can we find room for the God

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of Israel, for revelation, for commandment, for all that is Jewishly distinctive and essential? Fackenheim's answer is that modern man can discover and confront God as the ultimate reality only when he makes serious efforts to understand himself and his own humanity. In the search for self-knowledge man learns that his very humanity is both impossible and unintelligible without God. "The analysis of the human condition constitutes the necessary prolegomenon for all modern Jewish and, indeed, all modern theology."

What does that analysis show? Man is both an observer of nature and a participant in nature. As participant, he is like all other creatures in the world of nature, but as observer he differs from them radically. For he is a member not only of the realm of nature, but also of the realm of spirit. His natural needs are morally neutral or amoral, but in judging them as such he is forced to seek a non-natural moral standard. Like every natural thing that lives he must inevitably die, but in confronting this inevitability he forms concepts of death and deathlessness which are not given in nature. In each case of self-confrontation he is driven beyond the natural data. "Man appears to be mere nature; but in order to recognize himself as 'mere' nature he must be spirit also."

Man is the one crucial exception to that uniformity of nature that we take for granted as the foundation of naturalistic empiricism. In all other cases we reject the seeming exception as impossible in principle, since otherwise we would be

forced to deny the very uniformity which we are affirming. Any event or phenomenon which does not conform at once to the fixed patterns of the natural world as known by science is treated by us, not as some miraculous break in the uniformity of nature, but rather as a case of our own ignorance. We think of it as only a seeming deviation; not an actual one, and we are convinced that further scientific investigation will be able to assimilate this phenomenon into its pattern of uniformity. Fackenheim has no quarrel with this position, on the whole. Only when it comes to the analysis of the nature of man does he refuse to acknowledge that scientific naturalism is adequate. For here our self-knowledge makes it impossible for man to treat himself as nothing but a natural phenomenon. Spirit, thought, aspiration, hope, duty, moral striving are so vividly present to any man who confronts himself that only through sheer tendentiousness can he deny them or reject their implications.

Essentially, Fackenheim follows a Kantian line. It is in the moral necessity and subjective certainty of human freedom that he finds the basic ground for affirming the reality of a dimension in man which transcends nature. Kant also provides him with the philosophical tools for explicating and defending such a move. Kant's critical rationalism treats human reason as a specifically human way of looking at the world, not as a way of penetrating to the ultimate reality. He held that the world which is known through human thought and experience must conform to, and is con-

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ditioned by, human ways of experiencing and understanding. Whatever becomes cognitively available to man is filtered through the apparatus of human sensation and thought, through the forms of intuition and the concepts of the understanding. That is why we can be certain *a priori* that anything that we may experience, think, or know will have a specific structure and will conform to certain fixed patterns. Kant argued, however, that these uniformities are restricted to the phenomenal world, to the world viewed as appearance. As to the character of things-in-themselves, that ultimate reality which is beyond the appearance, Kant was not prepared to say anything definite so long as he remained within the framework of natural science. The moment he shifted to moral philosophy, however, he moved in a radically different direction. Kant found himself forced beyond the limits of naturalism and dogmatic rationalism by the inescapable fact that man has moral awareness, that he recognizes himself as having duties and as bound by obligations. In reflecting on morality Kant came to see the limits of dogmatic rationalism and simple-minded scientism. It is to this that he alluded in the famous passage in which he tells us (speaking of his own highest philosophic achievement) that he had "found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith." Though he cannot offer any evidence for God, freedom and immortality in his speculative philosophy, precisely because they transcend the limits of natural human experience, he introduces them as

necessary postulates of the moral life. Taking moral awareness as an immediate and undeniable datum, he is led to conclude that without these postulates moral decision and moral choice are neither possible nor intelligible.

Professor Fackenheim follows Kant a considerable way. He accepts the Kantian restrictions on the claims of reason and science. In the light of these restrictions he finds particular force in man's subjective awareness of his own moral freedom. Without this freedom there can be no moral responsibility, but when we affirm that man is free we are also affirming that there is a break in the fixed uniformity of nature and in the chain of natural causation. "For while *qua* observer man may view himself as a mere instance of law, *qua* responsible agent he must act as if he were free and unique. Nor can this belief be a mere illusion. If it were, all responsibility would lie in shambles."

Fackenheim stresses a second break in the order of nature, one which is as significant as the first. We not only recognize ourselves as free agents, but we also claim to know other men as free and morally responsible beings. As anything less they would lack that dignity and worth which is essential to their humanity. Though I do not experience another's subjectivity, I affirm it categorically. If I were to deny the possibility (and the actuality) of interpersonal relationships, I would be forced to reduce all other men to things, to morally neutral objects of my experience. None of us can honestly accept such a con-

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ception of ourselves, nor of other men. So it is that we break out of the rigid confines of pure naturalism, forced by our own subjectivity to recognize a reality which stands beyond the realm of nature. It is this recognition, according to Fackenheim, which opens up to us the theoretical possibility and tenability of religious claims. "If it is necessary to admit the free human other, as a quasi-miraculous break-through of the fixed world of objects governed by laws, is it possible to admit a miracle of miracles — a break-through of a free Divine Other into that world?" The central line of argument in this book is Fackenheim's affirmative answer to that question.

The God whom we know through faith is not described in detail, nor is any attempt made to prove his existence. Fackenheim accepts the Kantian view that God's existence can neither be proved nor disproved since He stands beyond the limits of all natural experience and speculative thought. We cannot describe or define Him since we have no language in which we can speak about Him literally. We only encounter Him and know Him, in so far as it is given to us, through direct and intense personal involvement. Our response must be expressed in some fashion, however inadequate and even misleading our language may be. Professor Fackenheim makes the point eloquently and clearly:

But to be unable to speak literally cannot mean to remain silent: for, to faith, that relation itself is a reality, demanding participation on the part of man. Man addresses

God, obeys His law, prays for and trusts in His mercy; he must treat God as if he were literally Person, Judge and Father. Man just speak, but speak symbolically; or (if we wish) anthropomorphically; for he speaks from his finite situation. But anthropomorphic language, not being absolute truth, is not therefore falsehood; it is the truth about the God-man relation as it appears from the standpoint of man; and that relation is itself a reality. How it appears from the standpoint of God man cannot fathom, nor is it his business to fathom it.

The substance of man's relation with God depends on revelation, that direct encounter with the Divine Being for which naturalism cannot account, and which it, therefore, dismisses as illusion, a kind of psychological aberration or self-deception. That a man may in fact be deceiving himself when he claims to have confronted God, is a danger from which there is no escape. This is precisely why every positive response to such a claim involves a decision of faith, a decision which is its own verification. That which is known in faith is immune from empirical-naturalistic criticism, since the methodological presupposition of all empirical science is precisely the contrary of the attitude of faith. Science requires the observer to remain detached from the data before him, but the neutral detached observer can never know the reality which is the divine-human relation. "For man either participates in that relation, responding to the presence of divine power in his human freedom, or else he does not know it at all." Of course, there are some false prophets who proclaim, "Thus saith

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the Lord God, when the Lord hath not spoken" (Ezekiel, 22:28). But the very possibility of false prophets suggests the possibility of true ones as well. For the man who participates in his own relation with God — and this he can never do as a detached outside spectator — the force of the experience is such that it is beyond all denial. Given a believing attitude, faith opens up the world of the divine, a world which otherwise remains closed and inaccessible. "Faith, to be sure, is a 'subjective attitude;' but because it is a believing attitude, it takes itself as receptive of an objective truth accessible only in the believing attitude and inaccessible otherwise." For those who lack eyes which see and ears which hear no objective evidence is possible. For those who do see and hear, no objective evidence is necessary. They decide for faith, as they must, because their own existential situation demands it. "Decision," says Professor Fackenheim, "stems from the insight that existence is inescapable. The decision of faith stems from the insight that God is inescapable. Man surrenders his neutrality in the realization that he cannot be neutral; he surrenders authority over his existence in the realization that he cannot be his own authority."

For Fackenheim revelation is far more than a moment of glorious exaltation. It creates and confirms human responsibility, thereby making us what we uniquely are as men. Revelation occasions commandment and duty. In relation to God every man becomes personally and morally responsible. In that same rela-

tion the Jew also becomes Jewishly responsible, for it is not as man in the abstract, but as specifically Jewish man that he stands before God. Fackenheim is not bothered by the "scandal of particularity" and sees no reason for being anxious about the tension between the universal and particular elements in Jewish faith. God is the Lord of all nature and of all history, but He is also the God of Israel. The Jew is a man immersed in all the concerns of humanity, but he is at the same time a very particular man, one who is confirmed in the covenant which binds Israel to God. As such, his responsibility extends beyond the moral obligations of all men to particular obligations of *homo Judaicus*, to that all encompassing divine law which is the Halakhah.

Predictably, Professor Fackenheim's views about the nature and scope of Halakhah are not acceptable to Orthodox Judaism. He is close to the position of Rosenzweig in stressing that all revelation is humanly interpreted. Consequently, no revealed text can be taken as God's word containing God's law and teaching in any literal sense. Yet, the customs, ceremonies, and sanctified practices of the Jewish people are all potentially laden with true religious significance that can reflect the presence of the divine in our lives. Fackenheim would reject no traditional *mitzvah* out of hand, since each may be an occasion for giving oneself to God in a concretely Jewish way. Neither would he accept any set of *mitzvot* as categorically binding, for their religious significance depends, not

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on the text from which they are derived, but on what we make of them.

Halakhah is Jewish custom and ceremony mediated through the leap into Jewish faith; and it thereby becomes the divine law to Israel. In themselves, all customs, ceremonies and folklore (including those Jewish, and those contained in the book called Torah) are mere human self-expression, the self-expression of men alone among themselves. But through the leap of faith any one of them (and preeminently those of the Torah) have the potency of becoming human reflections of a real God-Israel encounter. And thus each of them has the potency of becoming Halakhah, commanded and fulfilled: if fulfilled, not as self-expression but as response on the part of Israel to a divine challenge to Israel; as the gift of the Jewish self to God.

Fackenheim's conception of the nature of divine commandment flowing from revelation leaves us unsatisfied. It is pointless to enter into tendentious polemic, repeating once again the standard set of Orthodox moves. They are well known, and, except for their apologetic value, do not serve to advance materially the discussion of the issues. It would, however, be extremely valuable to have a direct and searching confrontation of Orthodox Jewish thought with the halakhic position advanced by Professor Fackenheim. There is so much in his theology that we can share and from which we can learn, so much that illuminates the stance of classical Jewish faith, that we could only benefit from a careful mutual examination of this issue which di-

vides us most deeply. For in these essays it is not clear exactly how Fackenheim conceives Halakhah. One gets the uneasy feeling that he himself still needs to work out his own position, and that at present he may occasionally be inadvertently resorting to a rhetoric which is beautiful, but not very illuminating. We need to know what it is that makes a custom or bit of folklore into a genuinely religious duty. How does one avoid arbitrary selection? When is the ceremony appropriated as a gift to God, and when does it become a specifically Jewish gift? May any practice invented by the Jewish people at any time in its history become Halakhah? If not, then which, when, and how? What weight is to be placed on those laws and practices enjoined in the Torah, and how do we avoid judging them by an external non-Jewish criterion? These are only a few of the questions which require and merit careful exploration.

Professor Fackenheim has produced a work in the field of Jewish theology which is worthy of the careful attention of every serious and thoughtful Jew. He has set forth with eminent skill and insight an analysis and explication of major aspects of Jewish faith which intelligent Jews, of whatever persuasion, should find instructive and stimulating. However we may differ on particular points, and most especially on the nature of Halakhah, we can only be grateful to him for this book which teaches us much, opens up new religious perspectives, and is an eloquent and effective exposition of Jewish faith.