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IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST

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These additional thoughts about the Holocaust, following our discussions at the Fall meeting, are prompted particularly by grappling with the ideas of Kazin and Fackenheim.

In reading about the Holocaust one constantly confronts the reaction that what happened is inexplicable, makes no sense. If by this we mean that there can be no logical or theological explanation for it - why it should have happened or had to happen - we can only agree. But I believe that this reaction also reveals a basic flaw in the general attitude of twentieth century western man: we simply do not take evil seriously enough. Despite everything that has happened in this century, which would provide more than enough empirical evidence for the radical and at times pervasive power of evil, we shy away from confronting it as an active, operative, at times personal, at times extra-personal element of the reality which we face and which affects our lives from day to day.

I feel that there are two basic reasons for this avoidance. The first is that so many do not want to be thought of as archaic, as not "modern." Since fantastic mythological perceptions of the personality and work of evil, and various related superstitious practices were so endemic in the ancient and medieval world, we who feel we have "moved beyond" those times, who are "up to date" must perforce not concur in such responses to reality, to life. The second, and infinitely more defensible reason is that dwelling on the reality of evil tends to remove responsibility for what is bad or wrong from the individual or the community, to lessen deserved guilt, to decrease the desire to change and improve.

But what in Hieronymus Bosch or the Hasidic legends about demons could possibly compare with the actions of the Nazi gaolers and their leaders? And certainly it is not necessary that a realistic perception of the reality and work of evil absolve and immobilize one.

Both the work of Kazin and of Fackenheim lead us in this direction. To Kazin, trained in the liberal intellectual milieu of early twentieth century, the

"life of reason" has become a delusion. One became aware that "all traditional frameworks for explaining were gone, that there was equally no help in modern thought for living with it."¹ Fackenheim states that:

Auschwitz is a unique descent into hell. It is an unprecedented celebration of evil. It is evil for evil's sake....

Auschwitz is the scandal of evil for evil's sake, an eruption of demonism without analogy...²

By beginning to perceive Auschwitz as the most direct experience of evil we may ever have, we at least have some tools for confronting it and grappling with it. This does not mean that we can "understand" or "explain" it, for there is a mystery in evil which defies explanation. Nor does it mean that like those who resort to theories of "suffering-in-general" or "persecution-in-general" we are now resorting to a theory of "evil-in-general." We are confronting a specific manifestation which took place in a specific place at a specific time, which of course operated "in time" and therefore reaches both backward and forward.

From this perception certain other awarenesses grow. The first is to recognize that the efforts of evil at Auschwitz did not totally succeed. The greatest blow in history on behalf of evil was struck - but it did not accomplish its goals. That Jews survived, and that there are today flourishing Jewish communities in the world is a rebuff to evil, an enforced retrogression. This thrusting back of the miasmatic onslaught is a testimony to the incredible devotion and commitment of Jews. Can it not also be seen as a testimony to the power of God who is engaged throughout the universe in an all-fronts war with the power of evil? Certainly we must agree with Fackenheim that no "redeeming" voice, in the traditional sense, can be heard from Auschwitz. But does not the "commanding" voice he hears - the voice which says "grant no victories" to evil - imply an involvement in the battle which in mysterious ways may influence the outcome? In the face of this commanding voice and the results it has brought, it is narrow to speak of the "absence" of God and in any sweeping way of the "death" of God.

But, as we said, the manifestation of evil operated "in time" and therefore is still very much with us. Though it may have been forced to recede somewhat it lurks waiting, prepared to seize opportunities to re-emerge. And the commanding voice still commands - "Grant no victories to evil."

The implications for the Jew of this command are clear for both Kazin and Fackenheim. The commitment to survival continues to be absolute. This

¹ "Living with the Holocaust," Midstream, June/July, 1970.

² "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust, A Fragment," Commentary, August 1968.

means not only the survival of those presently alive, but also the survival, in memory, of those who suffered and died. The concealing of what happened, the fact that there is "no place in many distinguished minds"³ for it are not permissible.

But what of the implications of the command for the Christian? The demands are no less absolute. In the confrontation with evil we are called to take sides. We must take the side committed to Jewish survival; in whatever ways that survival is threatened we must stand with and help the Jew, not abandon him as before. Likewise we must take the side committed to the survival, in memory, of those who suffered and died. We must assure and enforce the remembrance of what happened as our most direct experience of evil, in which the complicity and participation of Christians was extreme. We must strive to avoid and eliminate all forms of complicity and participation in the present. We must pray to the God who commands that He act. We must grant no more victories to evil.

³ Kazin, op. cit.

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