Emerging From the Silence: FASPE in Personal Retrospect

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Silence is deep as Eternity, speech is shallow as Time.

*Thomas Carlyle*

There is an eternal cry in the world: God is beseeching man. Some are startled; others remain deaf.

*Abraham Joshua Heschel*

For the first time the bus was silent. What can one possibly say after having witnessed something of the inner dynamics of atrocity, occurring as they did behind the blood-red brick that both constructs and encircles Auschwitz? It was the layering of grand deceit. There were no “showers.” Work did not make for “freedom;” it only delayed an inevitable and barbaric demise. One should not speak hastily after such experience. Even here I want to be careful with my words. Is not Auschwitz disturbing proof of the unique ideo-genocidal depths into which our own kind can fall? It’s no small matter being human. No other creature has committed systematic and premeditated genocide. We have long set ourselves apart through culture, philosophy and science, but Theodor Adorno’s words remain true: “That [Auschwitz] could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences say more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work to change them. There is untruth in those fields themselves…”¹ Indeed, Auschwitz proclaimed their failure. This is why Adorno at one time insisted that “after Auschwitz one could no longer write poetry.”² We have long deified the enlightenment value of “reason,” but can anything be more irrational than the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau? Aristotle famously referred to us as “rational animals,” yet one should not join these words too readily; for we far too often descend into animality instead of ascend to rationality. We are not rational beings as such, “only intermittently rational—merely liable to rationality,” as Alfred North Whitehead once commented.³

Such were the private thoughts that occupied my mind as I watched the trees pass by and the razor wire fences fade into the distance from my bus seat window. We were leaving emotionally exhausted after a long day at Auschwitz. A few hundred yards ahead the bus would pass a grassy field where a large stage was being erected. It looked as though a kind of concert venue was being built. My eyes were immediately drawn to a long banner hanging above the stage. Its black letters read: “Life Festival.” The irony struck me at my core; the entire day had been nothing short of a death festival. Heschel insisted that “our existence seesaws between

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Our dazed faces remained pasted against the bus windows. The silence persisted as our minds were awash with images of what we had all just been through. Unlike thousands of Jews, we were the ones who had actually walked out of the gas chamber. Such a thought can’t help but weigh upon you as your ride away in a comfy air-conditioned bus. The world was de-created in Auschwitz and we FASPE fellows were emerging somewhat like Noah and his family after the genocidal flood: God remains precarious; the world has started over and we are tasked anew with its creation. This is no easy task, and for the more sensitive among us—it is a dreadful burden.

Fusing together the heinousness of Hitler and the ethical universality of Kant, Adorno’s bold declaration still frames the backdrop of my FASPE experience: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will ever happen.”\(^5\) I am not alone in being confronted by Adorno’s words; they are a blatant appeal to our post-holocaust world, one that deeply neglected to “act according to that maxim whereby we can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”\(^6\) Religious believers would presumably agree that we should always treat others as “ends” in themselves with intrinsic value and worth and not merely as “means.” Auschwitz makes us pause, however. Just how “simple” is it for religious leaders, teachers and practitioners to follow this new imperative? What is our role? What should we do now? How do we lead our classrooms, congregations and lives so that Adorno’s plea—indeed the plea of six million Jews—becomes actualized in the world?

I don’t have clear and distinct answers to these questions. I didn’t have them before FASPE and I do not have them now. But what I do know is that FASPE was my first personal step toward honoring this imperative. In truth, I’m left more with a deep impression, one which has been carved out by the omnipotent “power of place.” This is precisely why FASPE needs to continue its work, not so it can give us answers (one certainly leaves with more questions), but so it can impress upon us the gravity of our role, impact and purpose in a world after Auschwitz. To speak personally, more than anything else, FASPE has left me with a profound clarity surrounding 1) the kind of person I should strive to be, 2) what it should mean to speak of “God”

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\(^6\) Refer to Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. 
3) the professional arena in which I am most effective in a post-Holocaust world. In these brief retrospective pages, I will focus on each in turn: Human Becoming, Divine Calling, and Vocational Demand.

**Human Becoming: Milgram, Moral Protest and Who We Can Be**

One of the most stimulating discussions during FASPE occurred after a film screening of Stanley Milgram’s *Obedience*. I will assume that readers know something of the basic format of this famous experiment and also the different angles from which it can be analyzed. Our session in Berlin was a great example of this diversity. In brief, Milgram sought to investigate “teachers” willingness to follow the experimenter’s demands despite the hidden screams, protests and even deadly silence of the “learner” whose incorrect answers resulted in increasingly serious shocks administered by the teacher. The experiment is often used to begin discussions of the genocidal obedience of Nazi officials who were apparently “following orders” in carrying out mass atrocity. There is no doubt that the complex realities of the holocaust transcend this simple experiment. Milgram’s work has often been milked for more than it is worth. Regardless, what remains for me the most important (and practical) takeaway from this film was the profound reactionary difference among participants. Some “teachers” objected immediately when learners began to protest. They stood up to the experimenter and refused to participate on moral grounds: the data of the experiment was secondary to the safety of the learner.

Let us say that this represents one kind of person, one who (on the whole) more readily acts upon their moral intuitions rather than subverting them. This is the person who tends to speak up when they sense or know something is wrong. To give one possible example, if they pass a home where some kind of domestic violence is taking place, they will take action, whether by knocking on the door, calling the police or something else. We all know people like this. The other kind of person clearly shown in the film is one who in like manner experiences a kind of inner moral protest, but subverts this sense either to the demands of the experimenter or the legitimacy of the experiment. They don’t speak up or fully act upon the sense of moral protest they are feeling. This is the person who walks by the home; they turn a “blind eye” for fear of intruding, making a scene or becoming somehow entangled.

These examples are, of course, basic. But they do effectively raise the practical question emerging from Milgram’s famous experiment: Which kind of person do you tend to be? Am I one who tends to act in some way upon a sense of inner moral conviction? Or, do I tend to keep to myself, ignoring the wisdom of the inner life? This is no minor question. Are we the kind of people who even in seemingly inconsequential affairs take an active moral stance? Because of FASPE, I’m left with the conviction that I need to speak up more. I need to act out more based upon my own intuitive moral landscape. We should not ignore nor subvert what protests internally. Indeed, FASPE has caused me to view my default passivity as a kind of disease which inherently steals lives. Auschwitz testifies both individually and collectively in this way. Its events point a finger at all of us.
The importance of Milgram’s question, I want to stress, is that it is not simply shackled to the present, but also extends into the future. It is not only a question of what kind of people we are now at this moment, but also (and perhaps more so) what kind of people are we capable of becoming? FASPE leaves me with this haunting question. And I would submit that this is an essentially religious question. Can I more readily become the kind of person who act[s] upon the call of moral intuition, who more actively works to align myself with that stubborn sense of rightness in the nature of things? Answering this question requires a kind of internal—even spiritual—sensitivity as to who I currently am and who I can be in a world where ethical passivity is an ingredient in genocide. It should be said, however, that for religious believers the “call” of moral intuition is not something that stands on its own. A living moral call does not simply arise out of a dead and morally inept universe. As John B. Cobb Jr. has argued, experience of such a call extends from “One who calls.”

**Divine Calling: Insistence, Existence and Ethical Theology**

When Jews entered Auschwitz for the first time, Nazi musicians performed from a stage sadistically welcoming them and keeping them in swift step. Was such composition not also a kind of Divine requiem, the requiem aeternam Deo first performed by Nietzsche’s madman? It is not easy to speak of God after Auschwitz. The internal tension of the seminary fellows was clearly felt at Oświęcim during our session titled “Where was God?” In the height of Job’s sufferings, we all remember his wife’s advice: “Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). But Auschwitz reversed this. All evidence suggested just the opposite: Jews were cursed and God had died. Emmanuel Levinas’ question requires an answer: “Did not the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of a quasi-empirical fact?”

For many, the events of the Holocaust did put the final nails into the coffin of traditional understandings of an omnipotent God. And rightly so; for this is no longer what “God” can and should mean to us in world after Auschwitz. Indeed, if Dostoevsky’s famous protagonist is correct that the death of one single child renders the entire God-world project void, then Auschwitz demands that we all slide our tickets back over the counter. During that long day at Auschwitz, we were just about to enter a designated building where Nazi doctors performed a horrific variety of “medical” procedures. These not only included sterilizing women, but also euthanizing children through needle injections to the heart. We were standing near the stairs when our guide told us about the children. As he did, my eye captured a young child as he stepped into the building. This is not something I will easily forget. At once, the protest of Ivan Karamozov became my own.

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10 Refer to Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, “The Grand Inquisitor.”
The question remains. What \textit{should} it mean to speak of “God” or “religion” after Auschwitz? I can imagine FASPE seminary fellows will offer radically different answers. And this is a good thing. I seek to share one which I believe is at the ethical heart of the Jewish and Christian traditions, namely, that God is not an omnipotent “being” that exists somewhere, but much more a challenge, possibility or protesting call from \textit{within} the world and from \textit{within} us. “The Kingdom of God,” Christ states, “is within you.”\textsuperscript{11} God can only be actualized in the world through human beings; and for my own Christian tradition, Christ remains the exemplary model. Ethically speaking, religion is the consciousness that something is \textit{required of us}, that God, as Heschel states, “is waiting to be disclosed, to be admitted into our lives.”\textsuperscript{12} There is a divine protest in the world and this protest can only be answered by the action of human subjects. The timeworn theological adage rings true: “God has no hands but our hands.”

To realize that our ethical action is indispensable for the actualization of divine aims in the world has the ability to transform our religious and theological sensibilities. It was Etty Hillesum who spoke of human beings as the “only ones who can ‘enable God to be God’ through acts of radical, hospitality, love and justice.”\textsuperscript{13} Hillesum died in Auschwitz in 1943. A profound entry in her diary captures this theological vision. Speaking to God, she solemnly admits,

\textit{…one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves…Alas, there does not seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstance, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place in us to the last.}\textsuperscript{14}

These are the powerful and sobering words of a kind of “weak” theology, one which lives or dies by human action. Echoing Hillesum, Richard Kearney has written of “the God who may be,” saying that “God can be God only if we enable this to happen.”\textsuperscript{15} John Caputo makes a similar distinction between God’s “insistence” and God’s “existence.” While God \textit{in-sists}, it is up to human beings whether God will \textit{ex-ist} or not: “The name of God,” he states, “is the name of an insistent call or solicitation that is visited upon the world, and whether God comes to exist depends upon whether we resist or assist this insistence.”\textsuperscript{16}

That the active reality of God can \textit{only} be mediated in and through human beings is the core conviction of what we might call \textit{ethical theology}. My own Christian tradition has far too

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Luke 17: 21
\item \textsuperscript{12} Heschel, \textit{Man is Not Alone}, 154.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Quoted in Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman, \textit{Reimagining the Sacred} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 258.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Richard Kearney, \textit{The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 2.
\item \textsuperscript{16} John D. Caputo, \textit{The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 14.
\end{itemize}
often forgotten that to believe that “God is love” is to believe that God is ipso facto an ethical reality. God is at great risk in the world—and so are we; for the ex-istence of love requires embodiment and action. In Auschwitz, divine protest was one of suffering insistence, but to the extent that we allowed these events to take place, God did not ex-ist. God remains silent if we do not speak. Atheism remains a reality if we do not act. Such a vision negates anthropomorphic omnipotence that could have stopped Auschwitz but decided not to. We must finally move away from this perspective. God is that suffering moral insistence that protests until brought into existence by human action. In this respect, Levinas is precise: “To know God is to know what must be done.”¹⁷ Such a question, though, is not limited to ethical situations alone. Extending over the horizon of our lives, it also points toward our vocational aspirations.

**Vocational Demand: Knowledge, Wisdom and World Creation**

We FASPE Seminary fellows have returned with a great deal of knowledge about the holocaust and the role of clergy and other professionals in its perpetuation. Such knowledge, however, is barren and ineffective if not translated into action. How to most effectively translate this knowledge into action is a question I consider to be at the very heart of what we might call vocational demand. What then is my vocational demand after FASPE? What professional arena will for me be most effective in heeding our “new categorical imperative” with respect to Auschwitz? I have framed these questions personally knowing full well that there is not just one professional arena wherein this imperative can be honored. Certainly, vocation involves many factors. To my knowledge, I was the only 2017 seminary fellow who will not lead a congregation or work primarily in congregational settings. This is necessary and important work to be sure; but I seek a university faculty position spanning the fields of philosophy, theology, religion and ethics. FASPE has deepened my conviction that university teaching is not only an arena where my talents and passions most fully come alive, but also where I can do the most good.

Teaching has never been a profession to be taken lightly. “A good teacher saves more lives than a good surgeon”—someone once quipped. While FASPE medical fellows may object to this statement, one can nevertheless sense the underlying theme: There should be a salvific element to teaching. The Holocaust vividly articulates the detrimental consequences of ideas and ideology. If always in the making, I remain both a philosopher with deep theological roots and a theologian with deep philosophical roots. My curriculum spans ideas which can effectively create, destroy and save worlds. Philosophy has never been about the accumulation of barren knowledge, but the “love of wisdom” (philosophia) as a guide for living. The difference between knowledge and wisdom is that knowledge “knows” and wisdom “does.” I hope to produce students who are not only aware of ideas and their consequences, but also live out those ideas in such a way that the world might be positively re-created. After Auschwitz, we are all charged with this task.

Adorno rightly proclaimed the failure of philosophy, art and the sciences in the face of Auschwitz. Nevertheless, their redemption is required in a world where Auschwitz will never be repeated. After FASPE, this is now more intimately tied to my vocational demand than ever before. I fully agree with Whitehead: “It is our business as philosophers, students, and practical men” to “re-create and reenact a vision of the world, including those elements of reverence and order without which society lapses into riot.”\textsuperscript{18} The core of FASPE has always been the conviction that one does not study the past for the sake of the past alone; rather we study the past in order to inform and transform the present through action. The Holocaust didn’t emerge \textit{ex nihilo} any more than the cosmos did. Premeditated efforts brought it into being; individual lives, choices and ideas all contributed to its riotous manifestation. We study the past so that we might actively affect the present. We study the past so that we will not repeat it.

I hope to have not spoken too hastily in these brief pages. When considering all that FASPE has unearthed in me: “speech is shallow as Time.” The silence in the bus that long and transformative day is unforgettable. It remains with me still. And I further would submit that there is not one seminary fellow who would agree with Adorno that one “could no longer write poetry” after Auschwitz. Even he would recant such a notion: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, there is not a single one of us who will forget the poem that Yale chaplain Rabbi James Ponet recited during our last session in the upper room of Jagiellonian University in Krakow. After years of carrying the burden of Auschwitz, “Rabbi Jim” powerfully proclaimed his release. We were shocked by the magnitude of his words; and that contemplative silence emerged once more:

\begin{quote}
Auschwitz

Before my feet stood at your gates,
I was your prisoner.
Before they paced your turf,
I was your slave.
My lungs had breathed your air,
Gasped in your showers,
Long before I was ever there.

I can hear the tearless Shma I cried naked in your chamber.
When I pray, when I sing, hear ani ma’amin on my lips,
Where in your chamber I was kissed into eternity,
Solaced to be dust in your ponds,
A bird in your birches.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 362.
But now I’ve left your dark kingdom,
Left the whirling winds of your mad fury, your barbs, your gallows, your roll calls,
Your capos, your sondercommando, your mud, your lice,
Your hunger, your musselmaner.
Before all and after all this,
I am, we are.

For I have left your ovens, your smoke, your faceless faces, your striped pajamas,
Your “Raus,” Your “Achtung,” your yellow stars and pink stars,
Shaved heads, rotting feet, puking, shitting, stinking tattooed corpses,
Your SS, your Gestapo.

I have left you there, an exhibit, a museum, there, near Oswiecem,
Where local guides share your darkness with the millions and millions
Who visit you every year,

And take with them a piece of your darkness,
A sixtieth of the infinity of your death,
Into the tortured comfort of their lives.

This time I’ve left you there,
In the Topf Company’s ovens in the stones
Of the Soviet memorial, in the birch trees in the air,
Left you there. Grateful,

That mine has been a two-way journey,
That you no longer have a special place in my soul.

I bid you adieu, adios.
I give you to God,
And I go on my way.