

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

DEPARTMENT FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

**Modern Jewish Thought**

**2025-26**

RLG 434F/3621F

POL 484F/2026F

**THE THOUGHT OF EMIL L. FACKENHEIM**

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The course will offer an introduction to the thought of Emil L. Fackenheim, who has been characterized as the most powerful and yet most controversial Jewish thinker to focus his attention on the Holocaust since 1945 (i.e., since the end of World War II). We will reflect on his position, and his claim that the post-Holocaust situation of humanity is best refracted through Judaism, Christianity, and philosophy. We will consider the full sweep of Fackenheim's thought, but especially as it relates to the historical situation of Jews and Judaism, and also how this bears direct and deep implications—moral, political, theological, and even ontological—for philosophy, religion, and ultimately the entire human race in the wake of the Holocaust. And we will also reflect on how his thought changes the parameters which used to rule for dealing with radical evil in the dominant Western traditions, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and philosophy—and in the case of Judaism, specifically contrasting him with Maimonides.

**Prerequisite:**

Permission of the professor. I would like to discuss with all prospective members of the class what their previous studies have been concentrated on, so as to ensure that they are (more or less) appropriately prepared for this advanced course.

**MAIN REQUIREMENTS:**

- (1) Class presentation(s);
- (2) A first shorter paper;
- (3) A second longer paper.

Requirements will be adjusted for graduates and undergraduates: graduate students in RLG 3621F are required to submit papers of 6-8 pp. on the first paper, and 12-14 pp. on the second paper. What the papers will focus on is discussed in what follows.

**FIRST SHORTER PAPER:**

Due Date: Thursday 23 October 2025

Length: 3-5 pages (typed and double-spaced)

Topic: Write a brief analysis of the theme in Fackenheim's thought with which your class presentation will deal.

**SECOND LONGER PAPER:**

Due Date: Thursday 27 November 2025

Length: 10-12 pages (typed and double-spaced)

Topic: Write a critical essay on one of the following three notions in Fackenheim's thought: (1) the 614<sup>th</sup> Commandment; (2) *Teshuva* for Judaism, Christianity, or philosophy in the wake of the Holocaust; or (3) what it means to say the Holocaust was an ontological *Ereignis* in being and history.

**COURSE WORK VALUE:**

First Paper = 30%;  
Second Paper = 40%;  
Participation = 30%.

The penalty for lateness in submission of assignments is 5% deducted per day that the work is late (unless this later date for submission has been previously authorized by the professor).

**LIST OF READINGS**

**1/Introduction: The Challenge of Modernity, the Question of Revelation, and the Response to the Holocaust/Shoah: The Philosophic and Jewish Thought of Emil L. Fackenheim (1916-2003)**

--"A Retrospective of My Thought," in Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy*, pp. 241-54; or in *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 215-26, 263.

**2/Why Begin with Medieval Thought in the Modern Era? How Is It Still Relevant?**

--"The Possibility of the Universe in Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Maimonides," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 16 (1946-47): 39-70; or in Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 7-20.

--Leo Strauss, "Introduction" to *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Adler, pp. 21-39.

**3/Is Hegel (Still) the Pinnacle of Philosophy? Was He Ever?**

--"Chapter 1: Introduction"; Chapter 2: "Human Experience and Absolute Thought: The Central Problem of Hegel's Philosophy"; and "Conclusion: The Crisis of the Hegelian Middle," in Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought*, pp. p. 3-14, 15-30, 223-42, 246-48, 264-65;

--"Moses and the Hegelians," in Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, pp. 81-169, 242-54;

--“Hegel on the Actuality of the Rational and the Rationality of the Actual,” in Fackenheim, *The God Within*, pp. 164-71, 236-37;

--“Demythologizing and Remythologizing in Jewish Experience: Reflections Inspired by Hegel’s Philosophy,” in Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History*, pp. 112-26.

#### **4/The Problem of History in the Philosophic Search for Truth—and What Happened to Eternal Truth and Revelation?**

--“Metaphysics and Historicity,” in Fackenheim, *The God Within*, pp. 122-47, 215-33;

--“The Historicity and Transcendence of Philosophic Truth,” in Fackenheim, *The God Within*, pp. 148-63, 233-36.

#### **5/Judaism, Revealed Morality, Immanuel Kant, and Modern Autonomy**

--“Abraham and the Kantians,” in Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, pp. 33-77, 236-41;

--“Hermann Cohen—After Fifty Years,” in Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 41-56, 250-51.

#### **6/June 1967, the 614<sup>th</sup> Commandment, and the Unplanned Confrontation with the Holocaust: The *annus horribilis* and the *annus mirabilis***

--“The 614<sup>th</sup> Commandment” (1967), in Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History*, pp. 19-24;

--“Jewish Faith and the Holocaust” (1968), in Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History*, pp. 25-42;

--*God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*, pp. 3-104;

--“The Holocaust,” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Mendes-Flohr and Cohen; or in Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 121-28, 257;

--“The 614<sup>th</sup> Commandment Reconsidered” (1993), in Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 193-94.

**7/Thinking through the Holocaust**

--*To Mend the World*: "Preface to the Second Edition," and "Introduction," pp. xi-xxv, 1-30, 336-37;

**8/Thinking through the Holocaust**

--*To Mend the World*: "The Problematics of Contemporary Jewish Thought," pp. 33-101, 337-39;

**9/ Thinking through the Holocaust**

--*To Mend the World*: "The Shibboleth of Revelation," and "Historicity, Rupture, and *Tikkun Olam*," pp. 105-46, 339; 149-225, 339-42.

**10/Thinking through the Holocaust**

--*To Mend the World*: "Historicity, Rupture, and *Tikkun Olam*" [cont.], and "Conclusion: *Teshuva* Today—Concerning Judaism after the Holocaust," pp. 225-313, 342-44; 317-33.

**11/What Follows from the Historical Rupture, If It Amounts to a Heideggerian *Ereignis*? And What Follows for the Classical Religious Sources?**

--*The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust*, pp. 1-119.

**12/The Shoah and the State of Israel: The Future of Judaism and the Jews, the Future of Philosophy, and the Future of Humanity**

--"The Holocaust and the State of Israel: Their Relation," in Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History*, pp. 273-86;

--"The Zionist Imperative," in *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (February 1995);

--"A Political Philosophy for the State of Israel: Fragments," and "Pillars of Zionism," in Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 195-208, 209-14, 262-63;

--"Philosophical Reflections on Antisemitism," in *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim*, ed. Morgan, pp. 273-86;

--“Holocaust and *Weltanschauung*: Philosophical Reflections on Why They Did It,” in Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 146-58, 258-61; or in Fackenheim, *The God Within*, pp. 172-85, 237-39.

--“The Nazi Holocaust as a Persisting Trauma for the Non-Jewish Mind,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38/2 (April-June, 1975): 369-76; or in Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History*, pp. 68-80.

--“The Religious Situation of a Jew Today”; and “God in the Age of Auschwitz and the Rebuilt Jerusalem,” in Fackenheim, *What Is Judaism?*, pp. 19-40, 293-95; 275-91, 305-07.