# Final Arguments and Conclusion:

# The Central Arguments

In this thesis, I described two significant corpora of Greenberg’s oeuvre: his post-Holocaust thought and his postmodern Jewish theology. Each corpus stands as an individual and self-comprised unit that elicits novel ideas and a self-sustaining theology. Acknowledging this, I contended that the post-Holocaust thought of Irving Greenberg laid the groundwork for his postmodern Jewish theology. This claim has implications for the scope and orbit of Greenberg’s postmodern thought, as I developed throughout the thesis. My claim can be unpacked through three central arguments:

1. Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought occupies a unique position in the environs of Holocaust theology. Its resistance to easy categorization reflects the novelty and significance of its stance. The postmodern motifs and the radical anti-theodic rhetoric from within a religious framework were unprecedented among first generation post-Holocaust thinkers. In this thesis, I contended that the theological significance of Greenberg’s work was undervalued by some second-generation thinkers for whom Greenberg’s name is conspicuously absent in post-Holocaust studies. I illustrated how thinkers such as Katz and Morgan, who regarded Greenberg’s thought as substantial, do much in revealing the novelty of his thought; I also discussed the recent work of Israeli thinker Moshe Shner, whose study uncovers the postmodern and pragmatist tendencies underpinning Greenberg’s early post-Holocaust philosophy. Though Shner only narrowly teases out these factors in his brief analysis, Shner’s paper has elucidated the germinating seeds and embryonic threads of Greenberg’s contemporary pragmatist (or as he describes it: PM) theology which lies at the heart of his post-Holocaust thought – especially seen through moment faith and the VC and sets the stage for his subsequent postmodern (pragmatic) Jewish theology.

2. The term postmodern (PM) can be applied to an umbrella of divergent positions and – hence – requires an accurate and precise definition. Greenberg’s designation of his work as PM sets the term in its broad sociological context, often ignoring its philosophical implications. In this thesis, I argued that consideration of Greenberg’s arguments, as well as an analysis of PM and classic pragmatism, gives rise to an alternative conclusion that perceives Greenberg’s theology as analogous with classic pragmatism, rather than postmodernism. Greenberg’s PM self-definition may have arisen from a general lack of precision in philosophical terminology or an erroneous analogising between pluralism and PM. Greenberg is indeed a religious pluralist, and this is a cardinal tenant of his thought and one of the central corollaries to his post-Holocaust philosophy, but this fact is not contingent on his thought being PM. The point being made here is more than just a hermeneutic quibble. Rather, it is an important part of my argument that an inextricable relationship exists between Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and PM theology. Part of my task was to uncover the themes Greenberg adopts from pragmatist philosophy and – in doing so – I supported my contention that his characterization of PM is nearer to classic American pragmatism than ~~traditional~~ PM. Once this understanding is established, it is easier to unpack pragmatism’s influence on Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and general Jewish theology.

3. Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought had a direct and unequivocal effect on his subsequent ‘postmodern/pragmatist’ Jewish covenantal theology. The anti-structuralist tendencies inherent in Greenberg’s thought find their expression in the paradigm of shattering and moment faith. Pragmatic tendencies such as meliorism, fallibilism, and pluralism form the basis from which epistemological and ontological shattering integrates into pre-existing religious structures and motifs that run through Greenberg’s subsequent covenantal theology.

# Greenberg’s Contributions Beyond this Paper’s Arguments

It must be stated – before I expand on each of these points – that it is not only in the realm of his academic contribution to post-Holocaust thought that Greenberg’s work was underestimated, but also in his contribution to general Jewish theology. I am convinced that one of the primary reasons for this underappreciation is due to the many roles and hats Greenberg wore. As well as being an esteemed Jewish theologian, Greenberg was, for the main part of his working life, an active communal rabbi and leader. Greenberg not only shouldered rabbinic and educational communal responsibilities, but he was also greatly involved in philanthropic work and projects that he devoted incalculable time, energy, and purpose to. All of these things have, over the years, been noted and applauded. In June 2014, Greenberg was the topic of discussion and analysis at the annual Oxford Conference which was attended by scholars and theologians of the highest stature who appraised his theological contributions. Greenberg was the first lecturer to offer an academic course on Holocaust studies and was involved in setting up many ground-breaking institutions such as United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Riverdale Academy (SAR), as well as CLAL. These many contributions explain that Greenberg’s writing often took a back seat and until this date (though it is in the final process of editing), Greenberg has not published a comprehensive manifesto of his thought in book-form. It appears rather in academic articles, journal publications, and a plethora of online lectures. The books Greenberg has published focus on specific, more idiosyncratic, topics such as Jewish holidays or interfaith relations[[1]](#footnote-2) rather than encompassing his wide post-Holocaust or contemporary covenantal thought.

Cognizant of all these accolades and achievements, I would like to point out a seldom-noted contribution of Greenberg’s: the profound influence he had on two of the most revered Holocaust thinkers and personalities: Elie Wiesel and Emil Fackenheim. Greenberg was responsible for giving Elie Wiesel his first academic position which was one of the factors responsible for propelling Wiesel toward greater public exposure. Wiesel notes this in his autobiography (add in) as does Greenberg when he writes, “[a]s chair of the new department, I convinced the administration to appoint Elie Wiesel as Distinguished Professor of Jewish Studies at City College – even though he was a writer and did not have an advanced academic degree. This was his first full, adequately paid professional position that enabled him to spread his wings” (Road not taken 32). Greenberg was also close personally with Emil Fackenheim, who attributes the transformation in his thinking about historicism to Greenberg. Once again, this fact should not be underestimated. Fackenheim is one of the foremost thinkers in the realm of post-Holocaust thought. Being a prolific author, Fackenheim’s thought features in almost every analysis of both Jewish and general post-Holocaust philosophy. Central to his oeuvre is his view on history. In this thesis, I brought verifiable proof that Greenberg was responsible for transforming Fackenheim’s perception on the role of history in the Jewish ambit which means – like with Wiesel – scholars are indebted not only to his primary contribution but also to his secondary one.

I will summarise each of the arguments outlined above by illustrating where and how they have been illustrated throughout this thesis.

## 1. The Uniqueness of Greenberg’s post-Holocaust Thought:

In this thesis, I comprehensively reviewed both first and second-generation post-Holocaust theologians. In my analysis, I presented the varying matrixes used by second-generation thinkers to assess, review, and schematize first generation responses. In unpacking these schemas, I noted the placement, or, in many cases, absence of Greenberg’s thought and tried to make sense of each occasion. I noted that the second-generation thinkers were inconsistent in regards to their placement of Greenberg’s thought. Of the American second-generation writers, Katz affords Greenberg’s thought the most attention and offers a charitable (though at times highly critical) reading. Katz perceives how radical certain components of Greenberg’s thought are, considering his identification as Orthodox. Banding him with the likes of Fackenheim, Rubenstein, and Wiesel, it is evident that Katz appreciates to the extent that Greenberg pushed Orthodox boundaries in presenting an atypical religious response to the Holocaust. However, with all the weight and import Katz assigns to Greenberg’s thought, he does not grant it the status it deserves. Braiterman’s schema is based on the category of theodicy and Greenberg’s thought is absent from his analysis. Braiterman’s justification for neglecting Greenberg is that he built on earlier religious anti-theodic responses and, hence, lacked novelty. Though this contention is obviously egregious, it does demonstrate how second-generation thinkers failed to accurately represent the novelty of Greenberg’s stance and intuit the pioneering impact Greenberg’s work had on other thinkers. I tentatively accepted Braiterman’s second contention that the lack of an exhaustive theology meant it was harder to trace and hence accurately assess Greenberg’s thought. However, it is apparent that even those thinkers who seldom mention – if not absolutely disregard – Greenberg in their analysis were aware of his contribution. Gershon Greenberg (GG) is an example of this phenomenon. In GG’s analysis, Greenberg makes no appearance, even though he would be the perfect candidate to be included. GG includes theologians such as Leo Baeck, Mordechai Kaplan, and Emil Fackenheim. Greenberg would be a natural and – arguably – indispensable voice to be included in his schema. Greenberg’s unique position with regard to history and the Holocaust was unpacked at length earlier in the paper. The salient points are highlighted in order to bolster this thesis’s contention.

I argued throughout the thesis that Greenberg is the first theologian to actively respond to the challenge of historicism from the prism of the Holocaust. I bought verifiable evidence that Fackenheim’s historicist thinking was fundamentally influenced by Greenberg. I explored the similarities among the two thinkers, exposing the novelty they both bring in grappling with the intrusion of historicism into the traditional ahistorical religious framework. Greenberg’s unique stature as an Orthodox rabbi ensures that this shattering amounts not just to a shattering in philosophical terms but a very real existential shattering in religious terms that takes the form of moment faith; a dialectical faith that is formed as a life response of the whole person that takes into account historical events as affecting the faith experience. Moment faith, the VC, and the third era are all central themes in Greenberg’s work and are premised on the historicist vision of Judaism. To be sure, there are meta-historical motifs that retain religious transcendence: a central doctrine in any Orthodox understanding of tradition, but – as Greenberg maintains – after the Holocaust, Jewish tradition has no choice but to engage with a naturalist view of history and its vicissitudes as a means of acting and taking responsibility toward redemption from *within* the stage of history. Greenberg’s position was, at the time, both unique and radical and its impact on other thinkers should be given the merit it deserves.

One of the points I noted in this thesis was that there appeared to be a correspondence between religious thinkers, such as Berkovits, Borowitz and Greenberg, that all lend weight to historicism in their covenantal theology. Once again, GG makes no note of this correspondence even though I believe it to be a central tenant of many contemporary American Jewish theologians. One should be curious as to why GG neglects Greenberg’s thought in his study of a topic on which Greenberg offers a rich and novel hypothesis.

Another second-generation thinker, this time from the Israeli milieu, who virtually ignored Greenberg’s contribution is Eliezer Schweid. Schweid was instrumental in exposing Israeli academia to Holocaust philosophy. His focus is undoubtedly different than any of the other second-generation responders that are presented in this paper as he approaches the topic with a definitive Israeli eye and slant. Writing later than the other thinkers, one might have expected him to engage more actively with Greenberg’s oeuvre, of which more became available as time went on. However, Schweid seldom makes mention of Greenberg. Schweid brings two main elements to the post-Holocaust evaluative schema: 1. the humanistic component, and 2. the Zionist component. In this thesis, I illustrated the overlapping themes and ideas the two authors share as well as their roles as educators in anticipating the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish identity. They both solicit humanistic fallibilism as a direct outgrowth of Holocaust exposure. Though there is a divergence in their endpoints or agendas – with Schweid eschewing any postmodern motifs while Greenberg embraces them – one would expect Greenberg’s work to feature unambiguously Schweid’s work, yet it does not. Besides one passing mention in the Hebrew version and two in the English version, Greenberg is near-to absent. I questioned whether it was the case that Schweid had not been sufficiently exposed to Greenberg’s thought, or whether – in fact – Schweid believed his thought to be too “American” to be of any significant value to the Israeli milieu and the topics they were grappling with. I concluded that neither of these assumptions is sufficient to explain Greenberg’s glaring absence. Furthermore, in the most recent Holocaust anthology to date, penned by Israeli educator and thinker Moshe Shner, Greenberg’s thought holds weight. Not only is it critically analyzed to be significant by Shner, Shner is the first second-generation thinker to categorize Greenberg within the remit of postmodern, post-Holocaust thought. I contended that Shner’s analysis not only lends Greenberg’ thought the significance it deserves, but it is also – I believe – the most accurate assessment of Greenberg’s work to date. Shner perceives not only the PM angle of Greenberg’s Holocaust theology, but more significantly, teases out the pragmatist motifs that I contended lies at the heart of Greenberg’s thought. It is not the Israeli dimension that could explain Greenberg’s absence in Schweid, since Shner – who is thoroughly ensconced in the Israeli milieu – not only grants Greenberg credence but even more surprisingly, happens to be the only second-generation thinker that – to this author’s satisfaction – successfully perceives the foundational motifs that underpin Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought.

Morgan, another important second-generation thinker, should be applauded for not only including Greenberg in his study but for recognizing him as a philosopher credited with novelty and originality. Morgan’s framework for analyzing first-generation responses is based on the question of how a thinker is governed by their response to the issue of the Holocaust’s uniqueness. For Morgan, not only is the Holocaust historically unique in terms of its qualitative and quantitative evil, it also presents unprecedented theological challenges. If the event is as unique as Morgan suggests, then it will demand that any contemporary Jewish thought – nay, any Jewish consciousness – must first pass through the fires of Auschwitz if it is to possess authenticity. Greenberg’s thought ticks Morgan’s box of authenticity by placing the Holocaust as an orientating event. Morgan successfully demonstrates Greenberg’s unique contribution as an Orthodox thinker who is courageous enough to break paradigmatical Jewish doctrines in exposing both his vulnerability and his willingness to engage with the consequences of accepting the radically unique status of the event which includes a stubborn refusal to accept any theodic assumptions. Ostensibly, Greenberg’s thought sits between radical theology and classic theodicy: the historical and meta-historical motifs, as well as Greenberg’s dialectical faith, could easily lead one to place him in the same category with the likes of other/modern Orthodox thinkers such as Berkovits and Soloveitchik. However, any nuanced study will verify this reading to be fallacious. Some have suggested his work to be analogous to protest theology like that of Wiesel, others to radical theology like that of Rubenstein. What I suggested in this thesis is that Greenberg’s contribution owes its novelty not only to the fact of his standing as an Orthodox thinker who elicits radical theological conclusions but – more significantly – due to the content of Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought and the corollaries it procured for a pioneering Jewish theology in a PM world. Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought reflects much of what America offered the Jews: meliorism, progressivism, optimism, and pragmatism. All of these elements feature in Greenberg’s thought. Ultimately, what I claimed in this thesis is that the relationship between Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and PM thinking is what lends his philosophy a unique identity that resists easy categorization.

In the second section of this paper, I undertook a comprehensive study of Greenberg’s post-Holocaust work with two aims: 1. to highlight the novelty of Greenberg’s post-Holocaust position, and 2. to trace the extant PM and pragmatist trends that would eventually be explicated in Greenberg’s later PM theology.

This study was divided into five sections: Theodicy, Moment Faith, the VC, *Tzelem Elokim*, and The Supremacy of Life in the Third Era. This fifth section is one that both theologically and historically frames Greenberg’s entire corpus of thought, moving from a post-Holocaust reading to a postmodern theology.

In the first section, I highlighted Greenberg’s robust rejection of theodicy and the traditional refrain of Divine retribution. Not only does Greenberg view this doctrine as erroneous from a philosophical perspective, he rejects its conclusions from an existential standpoint. Greenberg’s adage of negating any theological statements in the face of burning children has become his most oft-quoted remark, and it largely represents his stance on the issue. The rejection of theodicy – in particular the classic DR paradigm – is sourced to the shattering evinced by the event which denies easy and harmonious consolations. While Greenberg rejects the project of religious theodicy, he is equally critical of another ‘easy consolation:’ the stance of radical theology. To Greenberg’s mind, radical theologians such as Richard Rubenstein are creating a straw man: they establish absolute structures in order to satisfy their need for epistemic certainty. For Greenberg, in a post-Auschwitz world, one is denied certain answers which means one is forced to oscillate between atheism and belief. This results in what Greenberg terms ‘dialectical faith’ – or, adopting Buber’s terminology – ‘moment faith;’ the only authentic expression of faith after Auschwitz, argues Greenberg, is what he terms dialectical faith. Denying epistemological certainty, the experience of dialectical faith evades easy answers or propositional certainty. In this way, Greenberg’s thought appears consonant with the classic PM critique, but unlike that genre, Greenberg refuses to assail all value statements. His antipathy toward adopting a full-blown deconstructionist position is a result of his continued engagement with, and fidelity to, classic Jewish values. Arguably, this – together with a dose of classic American progressivism – leads him toward moment faith, from which he affirms and disaffirms value and meaning concurrently. The VC builds on Greenberg’s anti-theodic tendencies and dialectical faith while applying these models to the biblical covenantal paradigm. In the covenantal model, God chooses the people of Israel and mandates them with the task of acting as God’s representatives in the world. This imperative is based on the Divine promise of protection. Empirically, the Holocaust seems to undermine his covenantal paradigm in that God’s ‘protection’ seems to have been lifted, and the people of Israel – at the edge of extermination – are unable to fulfill God’s mandate. By dint of this fact, according to Greenberg, the Holocaust has forced the Jewish people to reframe the classic covenantal model of unconditional fidelity to one based on voluntary grounds. An argument related to this issue came from the Christian theologian Roy Eckardt. During a conference presentation of his paper in 1976, Eckardt claimed that God must repent for having mandated the Jews in their role as covenantal partners by removing the mandate. Though Greenberg disagreed with Eckhardt’s conclusions, Eckhardt’s paper awoke in Greenberg a visceral response that stimulated him toward thinking about the covenant and the Holocaust. Ten years later, Greenberg formulated the VC. It is this idea of Greenberg’s that represents one of the most novel treatments of the Holocaust that – concurrently – laid the seeds for Greenberg’s future, more nuanced and developed, Jewish theology. In this thesis, I analyzed and critiqued the concept of VC from varying positions; I also highlighted the burgeoning engagement among religious Jewish theologians with the covenantal idea in order to present the root of this phenomenon.

Of all of Greenberg’s ideas, the VC undergoes the greatest transformation and revision over time: this is a testament to the honesty and authenticity of Greenberg’s thinking. The VC is based on four primary assumptions: 1. that Judaism is a religion of redemption and humanity works toward that goal, 2. that humans are gifted with freedom in order to achieve redemption through human action rather than Divine fiat, 3. that the covenant is played out through a linear conception of history and requires acknowledging the mechanism of the process. Halakha and Torah are not ideal at any given moment but are steps toward the ideal, and 4. although God is the ultimate teacher, it is the role of humans to bring God to task when they intuit Divine action that belies ethics. This Jewish tradition of protest is consonant with both biblical and Talmudic figures who can be found arguing with God for the sake of heaven.

Each of these suppositions reflects Greenberg’s pragmatist tendencies and signals his move toward postmodernism. The voluntariness of the covenant, the move toward full human autonomy, and the shift from objective to subjective religious content (i.e., being viewed through the human rather than Divine perspective, a historical rather than a meta-historical prism), all point toward a deeper engagement with postmodern rather than modern religious sensibilities.

In order to further explain how the VC dictates Greenberg’s later theology, one must place it within his greater historical edifice. For Greenberg, Judaism is comprised of three main historical periods: Biblical, Rabbinic, and modern. Each of these periods is conditioned by a particular relationship between the human and the Divine. The biblical period is defined by God being the senior partner to humans Whose presence is manifest through Divine miracles and prophetic visions. The destruction of the Second Temple precipitates the start of the second era known as the Rabbinic Era. During this time, God’s presence becomes more hidden; He becomes, so to speak, the managing partner: humans are mandated to take on a greater role in the covenantal process. This conception is intuited by the Rabbinic authorities who, after the destruction of the second Temple, courageously took on the mantle of responsibility in playing a greater and more authoritative role in the Halakhic process through the oral law. Finally, the third era is precipitated by the onset of modernity. The covenant, though elevated to the realm of meta-history, is not immune to history and is shaped by history. In this way, modernity and the Holocaust both have an enduring impact on the covenant’s durability. Modernity gave mankind an opportunity to elevate covenantal commitment to its highest level by becoming the senior partner. In adopting unbridled human autonomy and progress, humanity and the Jewish people could have created an unrivaled opportunity for achieving human redemption and *Tikkun Olam*. Instead, human autonomy resulted in unprecedented evil and suffering. Mankind failed to intuit the Divine message of the senior partner. At the same time, God also failed to save humanity from its own demise, and His chosen people from destruction. Thus, since the covenant is broken, how can the Jewish people trust a God who did not redeem? There is also a sense in which the brokenness that comes after such a great and unprecedented tragedy is what infuses the continuing covenantal relationship with depth and authenticity. In its vulnerability, the covenant opens another level of commitment from its partners. It is through God’s total hiddenness that one can feel his total presence. The third era is one in which the project of modernity fails, and – thus – we must assess its practices, beliefs, and mechanisms to ensure such a historical moment of failure cannot happen again. To this end, Greenberg advances what he terms a ‘postmodern’ Jewish theology; however, it is not the nascent hard PM one finds among the Continental philosophers, but instead a soft PM more akin to classic American pragmatism. Greenberg’s thought embraces pluralism and subjectivity as a measure of progress and meliorism. Furthermore, Greenberg’s message is not one of pessimism but rather one of tempered optimism which advances a redemptive vision of Judaism. Pluralism is more than just a statement about the lack of metaphysical certainty: it acts as a preventive mechanism ensuring the placement of checks and balances against the hegemony and radicalization of ideology or truth statements (religious or otherwise). Greenberg’s concept of VC represents the application of this view to a central religious idea. In this sense, the notion of the covenant must be rescued from the trope of metaphysical dogma and bought down to the context of historical vicissitude, which elicits vulnerability and a pluralist conclusion.

The reason I believe the VC holds such a unique place in the landscape of post-Holocaust thought is because it engenders an authenticity that belies other responses. This authenticity is reflected in Greenberg’s refusal to accept classic theodic conclusions that make religious dogma and human suffering easy to swallow while equally not giving up on God and tradition. It is in his stubborn refusal to straddle either side of the theological fence that Greenberg’s unique voice is heard. The VC – as well as dialectical faith – retains fidelity to both the victim and God, while simultaneously building a resurgent Jewish theology that places human autonomy in the driver’s seat of history. This observation, coupled with its PM motifs of deconstruction and pluralism, ensures that even when humanity is in the driver’s seat, there is a certain humility and critical humanism that tempers the danger of absolutism in any guise from taking hold. The legacy of the burning children results in an uneasy faith and a compromised religious zeal, but – equally – it mandates a renewed commitment toward the redemptive process where no children should suffer anymore and the *tzelem Elokim* of every human should be elevated to the highest order.

It is this notion of *tzelem Elokim*,and the journey toward life, that takes pride of place in Greenberg’s theological corpus and remains so throughout the many revisions and reformulations it undergoes. For Greenberg, the central vision dictating any Jewish mission is the march toward life and life’s supreme value among humankind. Center stage in Greenberg’s theological corpus is the idea that humans are created in the Divine image: this is illustrated by the fact that Greenberg’s current unpublished *magnum opus* is titled ‘The Triumph of Life.’ In Greenberg’s view, the biblical journey from creation to redemption is a movement from non-life to life. Today, in a post-Holocaust era, this prerogative is even more pressing: for Greenberg, the greatest religious act in a PM world is the act of restoring the image of God for every human being. The Holocaust and the burning children resist religious language; rather, acting to restore the image of God through dignifying the other is the only religious language worthy of expression. Basing his view on a Mishna in Sanhedrin, Greenberg argues that the definitive religious principle is one that reflects the principles set out in the Mishna – dignity, equality, and uniqueness. Greenberg’s entire theological corpus is set around these three principles and the historical edifice that houses their development. The Halakhic system is the framework from which the supremacy of life and the protection of *tzelem Elokim* must be administered, and anything in that framework that belies such an agenda must be incrementally updated. The reason Halakha plays such a central role in Greenberg’s religious manifesto is that he still allies himself unreservedly with Orthodoxy. For Greenberg, Orthodoxy – despite its shortcoming and failures – remains the most authentic and faithful expression of Judaism throughout the ages and is the denomination that most likely promises continued fidelity to Judaism’s goals.

It was noted that the notion of *tzelem Elokim* not only stands as the central motif in Greenberg’s overall thought but provides the lynchpin tying his post-Holocaust and PM theology. The religious imperative that arises out of the Holocaust is a critical religious humanism that promises to overcome the Nazi project by restoring the Divine image, not through vacuous religious action, but through refracting God’s image in the dignity, equality, and uniqueness of each and every one of his creatures. This imperative – the only absolute imperative born in moment faith and VC – is the starting point of any religious manifesto. This imperative also underpins Greenberg’s greater PM religious theology. As the notion of *tzelem Elokim* develops into an overarching historical edifice, any activity (even by an atheist secularist) that upholds and advances this life-principle is considered by Greenberg’s logic to possess religious significance. In his exposition of covenantal history through the three eras, the ‘supremacy of life’ principle expands beyond the particulars of a Jewish covenant into a greater pluralistic vision of reality, history, and religion. Greenberg terms this religious ‘postmodernism.’ As one moves out of the narrow sacred precincts that once defined ‘religion’ and into everyday action that ‘re-creates’ life at every level, one witnesses a burgeoning postmodern version of religiosity with ‘holy secularity’ at its helm. Even the most secular act can be transformed into an act of ‘uncovering’ the Divine presence. In this thesis, I explored all these ideas at length, unpacking Greenberg’s notion of ‘holy secularity’ while surveying its relevance in the matrix of Greenberg’s notion of the third era. I demonstrated how the modern state of Israel becomes synonymous with the third era and the imperative of ‘taking back power’ after the powerlessness of the exiled Jew led to Jewry’s destruction. The imperative of power seems to be an anathema to PM, which buttresses the argument of this thesis: that Greenberg is less PM than he is pragmatic. On a pragmatic level, the Holocaust taught the Jews that they have no choice but to establish a place where they can ensure the survival and fruition of their national mandate. First and foremost, the Jews must ensure their own survival. It was through the secular Zionists that the dream of national rejuvenation came to fruition. In this sense – Greenberg argues – they were fulfilling the greatest Divine goal of the triumph of life and restoration of the Divine image through secular means. Greenberg describes the third era as one of “holy secularity:” a theme that he expands throughout his writings.

Moment Faith, the VC, the third era, and the centrality of life and restoration of *tzelem Elokim* are the main components of Greenberg’s post-Holocaust corpus. They are also the starting points of his PM theology. As I have illustrated in this paper, these components are certainly not without inconsistencies that warrant critique. Some of these critiques have prompted Greenberg to revise certain elements of his theology, including the VC. However, these shortcomings of Greenberg’s thought notwithstanding, I contend that Greenberg’s post-Holocaust philosophy offers a unique stance in navigating previously untread ground.

## 2. Greenberg as a Classic Pragmatist

While Greenberg is predominantly known for his post-Holocaust thought, his extensive articles and upcoming publications move far beyond his early post-Holocaust theology. To be sure, many of the themes present in Greenberg’s early work continue to feature in his later theology. At numerous points, and on multiple occasions, Greenberg uses the phrase ‘postmodern’ to describe his oeuvre. In this thesis, I have questioned this label, preferring to align a label of Greenberg’s thought with the postmodern trends realized in classic American pragmatism (rather than the accepted Continental postmodern matrix). Reared and educated on a strict diet of American pragmatism, this school of philosophy trickled into Greenberg’s work and religious purview. In this thesis, I argued that many of the principles on which classic pragmatism rests – and which were advanced in the thought of thinkers such as Peirce, James, and Dewey – find expression in Greenberg’s postmodern thought. Some key pragmatist principles such as fallibilism, humanistic pluralism, anti-foundationalism, and meliorism comprise significant components of Greenberg’s thinking, which lay the groundwork for a Jewish philosophy of social activism and pluralism.

In order to substantiate this claim, I explored the origins of postmodernism by delineating its main principles. After this, the American postmodern purview (through the perspective of classic and neo-pragmatism) was surveyed, which concluded in a comparative analysis of the two schools that highlighted the analogies and disparities between the two. This analysis bore validation of my original suspicion that when Greenberg labels his thought ‘postmodern,’ he is alluding primarily to specific postmodern principles: anti-foundationalism that erupts from the Holocausts’ confrontation with modernity, pluralism, and fallibilism. Though these principles can be found in certain strands of postmodernism, to a far higher degree they characterize classic American pragmatist philosophy. Further corroborating my claim is the fact that specific features of Greenberg’s thought, such as its melioristic motifs, epistemological humility, instrumentalism, communitarianism, and progressivism, find expression in the philosophy of classic pragmatists such as Dewey, James, and to a degree, Peirce – but are not occasioned to a high degree in Continental postmodern philosophy.

Curious about the relationship between the American and European experiences, I dedicated a section in this thesis to investigating divergences of war experience in the two landscapes. Continental postmodernism was – in part – found to be shaped by the impact of historical circumstances, significantly the Second World War. Early American pragmatism, founded through the ‘Metaphysical Club,’ was shaped by the American Civil War. For both these movements, the changing tides of war challenged previous philosophical assumptions and, in the end, replaced them with new ones – in America, pragmatism, in Europe, postmodernism. I previously noted that the emphasis on progressivism in the American version of postmodernism may be owed, in part, to its repressive treatment of war experience – both the Civil War and the Second World War (in particular the horrors of the Holocaust). For Continental postmodernists, the Holocaust was arguably a schism so great that it ruptured all previous thought structures that could not recover.

Americanization of the Holocaust – which includes stories of defiance, popularization of Holocaust films, and a kind of anti-historicist reading of the event – was brought as further evidence substantiating the latter contention. American progressivism obscures historical change – it is used as a repressive tool to keep out ‘real history.’ In many ways, the survivors who came to the shores of the ‘promised land of America’ adopted this mindset, also. Stifling a narrative of victimhood and repressing the memory of the horrors they had endured, they favored progress and advancement in order to build a new life. This is equally true of the survivors themselves and their contemporary American brethren who had not gone through the Shoah. This metaphorical blindness is eventually exposed by the next generation, and naturally, this threw many Americans into a spiraling existential crisis: a crisis from whose loins Holocaust philosophy was born and pragmatism experienced its revival. Greenberg was part of this group and – as I argued in this thesis – he had to leave the confines of American progressivism in order to achieve full exposure to the Holocaust, which occurred for him in Israel. Afterward, Greenberg returned to America where he underwent a process of integration and closure. This process married progressive and deconstructionist motifs, resulting in a theory that is consonant with American pragmatism rather than Continental postmodernism.

Finally, features of Continental postmodernism – such as its deconstructionist and discontinuous tendencies, as well as its pessimistic existentialist conclusions – make it an unlikely bedfellow for Greenberg’s later religious theology. Postmodernism is based on a descriptive theory – describing the way the world is, whereas pragmatism is premised on a critical theory of how to act in the world; this explains their central difference. Postmodernism obtrudes future possibility; pragmatism opens up future possibilities. Postmodernism ends in cynicism and despair; pragmatism ends in optimism and hope. I followed the argument advanced by Talisse, Aiken, and Hicks that, despite its chronologically preceding PM, pragmatism (with which PM shares many features), in fact, provides its antidote. I concluded that Greenberg’s later theology bears all the distinctive features of American progressivism as it comes on the heels of rupture and the experience of war. In a sense, Greenberg’s early diet of American pragmatist philosophy and traditional Orthodoxy provides a corrective to the postmodern motifs inspired by his exposure to the Holocaust and its corollary theological conclusions.

I continued my analysis by demonstrating where postmodern and pragmatist motifs arise in Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and postmodern theology. In reference to the postmodern motifs, I noted three main themes indicating how each one has its roots in PM but is ultimately characterized in a greater way by American pragmatism.

1. The ‘decentered self’.

In this thesis, I pointed to one aspect of postmodern theory that finds expression in the works of Lacan and Ricoeur: the unified ‘self,’ consonant with modernity, which becomes decentered and ‘fragmented’ and results in a disorientated nomadic self. This notion is part of the wider postmodern motif of deconstruction and has many parallel themes in the post-Holocaust experience, which – as illustrated in the works of Eric Santer – lies in the moment of ruptured frameworks. Greenberg’s description of the moment in 1961, in which he faces the true extent of the Holocuast, reveals not only postmodern motifs of rupture, but also the psychological postmodern ‘decentring of the self’ in contrast to the ‘totalizing self’ of modernity. From this position, ontological and epistemological pluralism arises. Furthermore, I opined from various studies done by thinkers such as Eric Santer that the experience of the disintegrated subject results in a disequilibrium which can be allied in many ways to the post-Holocaust experience. This disequilibrium is manifest in Greenberg’s own experience, when he describes how the realization of the significance of the Holocaust as making a mockery of his life-long dedication to prayer. The radical doubt that enveloped Greenberg’s entire life and practice was pervasive enough to incur the kind of ‘decentring of self’ or alienation that is described by postmodern psychology. The experience of disintegration accompanied Greenberg for much of his subsequent theology; however, the rupture is eventually integrated into pre-existing frameworks that allow for redemptive motifs reminiscent of the meliorism one finds in pragmatist thought.

2. Fragmentation/deconstruction/rupture

In this thesis, I posited that one of the central tenants of postmodern thought is a strong anti-foundationalism that disintegrated all absolutes. In their attempt to rid philosophy of its essentialist nature, the postmodernists – starting with Heidegger through to deconstructionists such as Foucault and Derrida – championed a narrative of rupture. Such a narrative infused with motifs of shattering, and disintegration, as this thesis has argued, was allied in many ways to the event of the Holocaust and everything that followed.

I have proposed that many of the themes manifest in Greenberg’s post-Holocaust writings are predicated on these postmodern themes of rupture and brokenness. In this thesis, I offered an in-depth analysis of the ways in which these themes play out in Greenberg’s work, including by bringing in numerous examples to buttress this claim. However, Greenberg also moves beyond deconstruction in a way Continental postmodernism does not. Piecing together the fragments of his shattered theology, Greenberg adopts a progressive, morally-rich ethical theory that preserves individual moral responsibility even in the face of radical evil. In an interesting and compelling move, Greenberg appropriates classic kabbalistic motifs such as the shattered fragments (*shvirat hakelim*) and repairing the world (*tikkun olam)* toward constructing his postmodern Jewish theology. Greenberg’s fusion of mysticism and postmodernism is something scholars find in the works of Rav Kook and – more recently – Tamar Ross and Rav Shagar (Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg), all of whom follow PM themes to construct a religious theology. Greenberg’s work, however, is different from these thinkers, since it is rooted in the Holocaust which lends it a uniqueness not found in the thought of many other postmodern religious thinkers.

As I posited in this thesis, Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought adopts motifs of rupture, disillusionment, and fragmentation akin to postmodernism but – simultaneously – there is a drive toward constructive theology, akin to pragmatism. This dualism is expressed through Greenberg’s notion of dialectical faith – the only type of authentic faith possible after the Holocaust – a faith that oscillates between images of despair and redemption, Auschwitz and Israel, between destruction and construction.

Greenberg’s VC is another expression of the fragmentary character allied to the relationship between humans and the Divine. The concept of covenant prior to the Holocaust had been elevated in an anachronistic Rabbinic reading to a metaphysical construct, impervious to historical or theological change. In Greenberg’s eyes, the Holocaust ‘shatters’ the covenant; that is: it shatters the once perceived immunity of the covenant to external and empirical influence. The Holocaust forces the people of Israel to reassess their relationship not only to the Author of the covenant but also – and more significantly – to the obligations the covenant demands from its adherents. The experience of ‘shattering’ in Greenberg’s writing is one that engenders absolute despair and disillusionment and, consequently, theological fissure. However, even in his early post-Holocaust essays such as *Voluntary Covenant* and *Cloud of Smoke Pillar of Fire,* there are moves toward reconstruction and hope on Greenberg’s part. Faith may be fragmentary and broken, but it is still present, thereby appropriating the classic quote by Rabbi Nachman: “there is nothing as whole as a broken heart,” and – as such – I argued that hard PM is not consonant with Greenberg’s ultimate theological conclusion. It is the search for ways to maintain covenantal obligation and faith – even after its total rupture – that characterizes Greenberg’s thought. These efforts include “The Promise of Pluralism” and “Human Co-Creativity in the Covenant” as well as “Messianic Time” and “Responding.” The constructiveness and ethical imperative – as well as the elevated role of humanity in constructing hope and affirming life that emerges out of our confrontation with despair and shattered faith – should not be downplayed; in fact, these features are at the very heart of Greenberg’s theology.

The agency that Greenberg invites the post-Holocaust Jew to adopt is not an easy or passive one. It is – rather – an agency wrought with fragmentation and disorientation, but it is an agency nevertheless. If Greenberg was indeed a postmodern thinker, in the purest sense, the narrative of destruction and deconstruction, fragmentation and brokenness, would be noxious enough to sever the covenantal tie between God and His covenantal people. But, instead, Greenberg argues for a radical reinterpretation of the covenant, thereby rescuing it and its agents (God and the people of Israel) from postmodern oblivion. Destruction becomes reconstruction, despair becomes hope, and fragmentation metamorphizes into a vulnerable but decisive whole that beckons agency and action. This move is the pivotal one from a postmodern to pragmatic position. This argument is further consolidated in the thesis by unpacking each of the outgrowths mentioned above from Greenberg’s essay “VC” and thereby illustrating the way these tendencies merge the deconstruction of robust PM with its more nuanced version found in classic American pragmatism.

3. Disillusionment with modernity

One common thread that almost all postmodern variants (including American pragmatism) share is some sense of disillusionment with the project of modernity (or the Enlightenment). This disillusionment takes many forms: from the extreme anti-foundationalism of Continental postmodernists to the modern nuanced critiques of social theorists and sociologists like Giddens, Bauman, Webber, and Taylor as well as those in the Frankfurt school such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas. A familial theme between them is ‘mastery.’ This could be in the guise of ‘master narratives’ or ‘master ideology’ or ‘mastering nature.’ In my thesis, I highlighted that a dominant feature of this disillusionment was predicated on the experience of the Holocaust, wherein the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment and the ‘mastery’ narrative were used to justify crimes against humanity. Absolute idealism had proven to be bankrupt. On the heels of this bankruptcy comes postmodern deconstructionism, pluralism, and the return to subjective ethics.

In this thesis, I offered a thoroughgoing analysis of the areas in which disillusionment with modernity can be detected in Greenberg’s thought. His turn toward postmodernism is a turn away from absolute idealism and its extant dangers (as witnessed in the twentieth century). At numerous times throughout his writings, Greenberg addresses areas in which modernity failed. It is not that the ideas of modernity are in and of themselves evil – on the contrary, modernity and the Enlightenment, including the scientific and Cartesian revolutions, offered an upgrade of life and progress. However, Greenberg suggests that every idea works within a spectrum that – if violated – possesses the potential of turning pathological. All ideas must be applied within an atmosphere of pluralism and humility that is subject to checks and balances. Only in this way can Enlightenment ideals, or any ideals for that matter, be safely and authentically integrated into society. Greenberg’s analysis is both incisive and important for it is not an all-out critique of modernity in the postmodern sense, but rather offers a thoughtful consideration of what can be learned and how one can progress from a moment of rupture and failure. My interpretation of Greenberg goes far in explaining why pluralism becomes not only a central feature of his thought but a component of his religious activism and interfaith projects. Pluralism is the mechanism through which one can continue to apply values and ideals without them being exploited toward totalitarianism. Through pluralism, one can move from post-Holocaust rupture to postmodern constructive theology. Pluralism provides the checks and balances needed to ensure both epistemological humility and ontological reverence toward the ‘other.’ Such a society will be protected from the dangers of any formularized radicalism.

Greenberg’s vision of pluralism is grounded in growth and progress rather than radical subjectivism. Greenberg premises this vision on the image of the shift from a Newtonian to Einsteinian universe, wherein many absolute center points exist and each absolute center point is defined relative to the system in which it is embedded. For Greenberg, a post-Holocaust reality mandates a shift in religious consciousness where one can apprehend the danger of adhering to binary mindsets and – instead – embrace varying manifestations of truth and values according to each system.

I concluded with this argument that Greenberg shares an affinity to the postmodern critique of modernity. However, rather than rejecting outright all modernist principles and following the path of radical relativism, Greenberg appropriates a pluralism that is infused with serious authority claims for each faith within its own framework.

In these ways, Greenberg exhibits an affinity with various postmodern themes and thinkers. However – in the end – Greenberg’s affinity to pragmatism is what lends his work its ultimate value. For Greenberg, an idea cannot remain in the realm of the abstract or the ideal; it is only worth its cash value in the difference it makes practically in the world. The greatest affinity is in the progressiveness central to both philosophies. There is something quintessentially American about the melioristic progressive ideas found in both the pragmatist tradition and Greenberg’s religious theology. Following Krijnen and Hickman, I maintained that pragmatism offers tools to appropriate elements of postmodernism toward positive rather than pessimistic conclusions. I explored how war affected Europe and American societies how their cultural responses differently point to the exposure of horror and mortality that Europeans endured as opposed to their American counterparts. The experience of American Jewry is characterized by American progressivism. Unlike the experience of emancipation in Europe, which in most instances meant abandoning religious, or certainly Orthodox, moorings toward a universal moral code, the American experience was different. America’s positive stance toward minorities and its focus on progress as part of the developing morality of each group’s cultural context meant the burgeoning of a progressive Orthodoxy that flourished in the 1960s and 70s. It also meant, however, the suppression and antipathy toward victimhood and painful memories of the Holocaust. Survivors were reluctant to share their stories, and American Jewry was overall indifferent to them. Even when consciousness of the Holocaust eventually came to the fore in the 70s and 80s, its American contextualization championed Holocaust representation through uplifting stories of defiance, survival, and regeneration. I posited that Greenberg’s confrontation with the Holocaust had to occur outside of the progressive American cultural context. It was in Israel in the library of Yad Vashem that the full extent of the rupture was intuited by Greenberg. When he returned to America, burdened with the weight of Holocaust memory, Greenberg set out to integrate the experience of rupture, deconstruction, and discontinuity that he experienced in Yad Vashem with the progressiveness that was so characteristic of his American upbringing. What emerged in Greenberg was a unique voice in both post-Holocaust thought and religious theology. Greenberg’s is a corrective theory that – unlike the deconstructionism characteristic of postmodernism – does not propose to totally uproot or depose tradition, but instead aims to correct and realign misread and radicalized interpretations of the tradition in light of contemporary consciousness and Holocaust memory.

Greenberg is also the nexus at which post-Holocaust and postmodern theology meet. In this thesis, I continued to outline the pragmatic themes that played out in Greenberg’s work and noted three main corresponding areas: 1. fallibilism, 2. pluralism 3. ethics of power, and 4. meliorism.

1. Fallibilism was explored by emphasizing three main facets: fallibilism, truth, and contingency. Greenberg’s thought was shown to possess many fallibilist qualities. Fallibilism attests not to the impossibility of absolute knowledge but to its vulnerability. Epistemological certainty is neither denied nor affirmed. Knowledge is achieved through piecemeal search and inquiry that is under constant revision rather than by final prescriptive contentions. In this thesis, I contended that Greenberg’s version of pluralism is analogous to the fallible pluralism that is characteristic of pragmatist thought. Greenberg adopts fallibilist principles as means of self-critique in a post-Holocaust landscape. I brought in this thesis numerous instances in which Greenberg’s writings demonstrate a distinctly fallibilist tone and content that employs epistemological humility as the cornerstone of a moral and religious personality. In my thesis, I also illustrated the fallibilist principle from the human perspective. I highlighted how the principle of human fallibilism sits at the heart of Greenberg’s entire covenantal theology and – coupled with the notion of ideological modification, checks and balances, and ‘associated living’ so reminiscent of Dewey – are themes that play out in all of Greenberg’s work. The second fallibilist principle this thesis explored was in relation to ‘truth.’ Exploring the conception of truth in both Peirce and James, I surmised that – as opposed to Platonic truth that is up-down – pragmatic truth is down-up, or perhaps ground-cross. Pragmatic truth lacks objective certitude and, rather, exists as a feature that grows as opposed to being discovered. Hence, truth exists for the pragmatist in its consequences rather than its origins; in the future rather than the past. In this thesis, I highlighted an uncanny resemblance between the way in which both James and Dewey perceive truth and a well-known Talmudic Aggadah. In teasing out the concurrent themes and motifs between them, I sought to illustrate that even within classic Rabbinic thinking, the emphasis is on action rather than dogma and the pursuit of constructive truth rather than correspondence truth. Or, as Ochs puts it, Judaism is concerned with redemptive rather than propositional truth. Divine truth is measured by covenantal fidelity rather than epistemic propositions. I explored the shift toward a more dogmatic Orthodoxy during the nineteenth century that concurrently affected the way Orthodoxy approached philosophical truth constructs. I was curious about the reception of Greenberg’s thought within the traditional Orthodox arena, and I illustrated the controversy allied to his pluralist stance and interfaith dialogue initiatives. On the other end of the scale, I highlighted Orthodox postmodern thinkers such as Tamar Ross whose tempered critique of Greenberg states that though Greenberg embraces pluralism, he is reluctant to leave metaphysical truth at the door.

It is the question of how to ground religion in non-dogmatic truth, or how to embrace religious pluralism while still mandating certain truth claims, that plagues Greenberg’s PM theology. He asks the question himself on numerous occasions: “how is pluralism possible if the individual still experiences within the native system the absolute claim of the Divine?”. (*Seeking* 388) In this thesis, I explored the way in which Greenberg responds to this tension by showing that it forms the basis for his important distinction between pluralism and relativism. At this point, the pragmatist theory of fallibilism in relation to truth emerges in Greenberg’s thought. Greenberg’s thought is the answer to the tension between fidelity to certain principles of faith and the necessity toward pluralism. Animating philosophy in Greenberg’s thought is a fallibilist conception of truth. This conception is explored in Greenberg’s writings from varying dimensions and chronological expositions. What emerges is a conception of truth that is contextually and sociologically bound, making absolute certitude an impossibility. But, what also emerges equally is an intuition that some degree of truth with a capital ‘T’ is necessary to function successfully within the framework of covenantal faith. Fallibilism means my truth will always be tempered by making space for the other and obtrude arrogancy and dogma, but it will prevent the spiral into relativism by still keeping open the possibility of absolute principles of truth. Finally – in perhaps the most speculative, but hence the most interesting observation – I argued that the notion of contingency so characteristic of pragmatist philosophy has much in common with Greenberg’s thought. Reflecting on the American condition as a country without deep historical or cultural foundations, pragmatist philosophy’s rejection of philosophical foundationalism should come as no surprise. Furthermore, classic pragmatism embracing this sentiment of contingency was met with great hostility and critique from within the European analytic tradition. American pragmatism heralds the contingent nature of reality as supreme. In the case of Pierce contingency does not negate necessity or order in the universe but rather is integrated into it. Either way pragmatism exposes contingency as a value worthy of attention. In my thesis, I exposed this idea in the musings of Greenberg with particular reference to the Halakhic process. Halakha, the system through which Judaism works in the world, is – according to Greenberg – premised on the idea of contingency.

2. Pluralism is a foundational concept in both classic pragmatism and Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and PM theology.

Pluralism as a concept in both the pragmatist and postmodern schools of thought was explored at length early in this thesis as a foundation for understanding its appropriation in Greenberg’s thought. Adopting Avi Sagi’s differentiation between hard and soft pluralism, I illustrated the axiomatic between soft pluralism and pragmatism and showed its relevance to Greenberg’s thought. Greenberg is a soft pluralist who views religious commitment as something dictated less by the existence or denial of absolute truth and more by the integrity of individual belief. In this way he parallel’s James. The term proposed by Bernstein, “engaged fallibilistic pluralism,” accurately describes the kind of pluralism Greenberg espouses: a taking of ones’ own position and value system seriously and committedly while simultaneously being open to truly hearing and internalizing the position of the other. In an exhaustive exploration of Greenberg’s pluralism, I included in this thesis both his early and more recent conceptions on the subject and – therefore – I substantiated the claim that Greenberg’s pluralism is more pragmatist than PM as well as verifying the wider contention advanced in this paper that Greenberg’s pluralism rises from his encounter with the Holocaust.

In his early work, Greenberg’s conception of pluralism is more limited and arises phenomenologically, rather than epistemically. In its earliest guise, this position is expressed as “an absolutism that knows its limits.” (*Seeking*  388) It could even be justifiably described as soft absolutism rather than soft pluralism. In a sense, Greenberg’s pluralism reflects his early misgivings of radical ideology and his search for a mechanism that would ensure a ‘never again’ post-Holocaust world. Pluralism’s fallibilist approach to the self creates a self-limiting apparatus that protects against incendiary ideological extremism: it makes for a partnership between two equals but fails to take the final step of admitting the truth in the view of the other. In this early phase, Greenberg’s focus is primarily on intra-faith dialogue and dynamics. In the second phase, as witnessed in his book *Between Heaven and Earth,* pluralism is discussed primarily within the ambit of interfaith dialogue and offers a comprehensive application of the principle that moves beyond its preliminary musings.

In this thesis, I explored Greenberg’s second phase primarily through his book *Between Heaven and Earth*, which amalgamates a series of essays on the subject of Jewish-Christian relations. At this stage, Greenberg was deeply committed to interfaith forums and dialogue and – consequently – I witnessed an expansion in his conception of pluralism: it moved to include not just the human dignity of the other as expressed in his early rendition, but also the opinions and faith of the other. Greenberg’s position is best described as a pluralism that accepts the uniqueness and truth of each position, but whose faith is enriched and transformed by the encounter with another faith. Greenberg still affirms some form of absolutism, perhaps as a way of protecting against relativism. This short sentence summarises it best: “Pluralism is an absolutism that has come to recognize its own limitations.” (Ibid. 388) In this thesis, pluralism was shown to be the lynchpin between Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and postmodern philosophy because pluralism creates the conditions that allow checks and balances for any system or ideology becoming radicalized. Pluralism is a kind of fallibilism that ensures one never takes their position/ideology/worldview as absolute. Reverence, total engagement with and respect for others and their views, will keep a person’s views and ideology in check. As Greenberg says: “[t]he ethical principle is clear: disagreement, yes; delegitimating, no.”[[2]](#footnote-3) For Greenberg, pluralism is the postmodern tool through which the Holocaust can never occur again. Greenberg’s views on pluralism were not without their critique and controversy. For this thesis, I referenced Greenberg’s teacher and mentor Joseph Soloveitchik’s essay “Confrontation” as a means of highlighting the problematic in Greenberg’s own thought. For R. Soloveitchik, faith possesses an ontological facet that defies universal or objective categorization, and – hence – resists the project of pluralism. Greenberg rejects the narrowness of Soloveitchik’s religious ontology: opting instead for a religious teleology that engages and is affected by the ‘other’ be they Jewish, Christian, or any other religion.

In this thesis, I made use of William James’ notion of pluralism as a basis to understanding the kind of pluralism Greenberg espouses. Two later essays were brought in and unpacked as a means of illustrating the type of pluralism Greenberg propounds in his recent writings: a pluralism that fully embraces the position of the other, lends it gravitas, and allows it to shape and transform one’s own thinking. Greenberg’s position on both the intra-faith and interfaith level was one Orthodoxy found hard to contend with, and he was subject to heavy criticism on many occasions for taking this stance; at points, Greenberg almost assumed a pariah status among Orthodox traditionalists. This disagreement between Greenberg and traditionalists was illustrated through my presentation of the Lichtenstein-Greenberg exchange and the occasion of Greenberg being put up on charges of ‘conduct unbecoming of an Orthodox rabbi’ by the Rabbinical Council of America’s Honor Committee. Notwithstanding this critique, Greenberg is careful to state his anti-relativist claims in almost every piece on pluralism. This fact was highlighted through the many instances in which Greenberg rebuffs the relativist position, adopting in its stead a pragmatist one.

In summary, Greenberg’s pluralism is not synonymous with a typical postmodern relativism, but rather with the type of engaged fallibilist pluralism that characterizes classic American pragmatism. Greenberg’s is a pluralism born out of his encounter with the Holocaust (as we see from a subtitle in a recent essay: “The Holocaust transforms my thinking: Pluralism follows”). In his search for preventive mechanisms against the failings of modernity and the resurgence of both religious and ideological fundamentalism, Greenberg finds an answer in the type of tempered pluralism he espouses. In addition, Greenberg’s primary motif of *tzelem Elokim* is the foundation of his pluralist principle: if one truly honors the dignity, equality, and uniqueness of every divinely created human being, then one must also take seriously their opinions and faith positions. At the same time, Greenberg’s fidelity to Judaism and its idiosyncratic tradition, heritage, and law (which he still aligns with certain metaphysical claims) prevents him from adopting an absolute relativist position.

In concluding the section on pluralism, I illustrated how Greenberg’s position grew out of his encounter with the Holocaust. I mapped Greenberg’s journey toward a pluralistic theology and I showed how the type of pluralism he espouses is analogous in many ways to pragmatism. This ‘engaged fallibilistic pluralism’ embodies the true essence of Greenberg’s postmodern theology.

Finally, the notion of ethics of power dictates the strong pragmatic motifs in Greenberg’s work. Unlike typical postmodernists, Greenberg recognizes the ethical necessity of power both on an individual and national level.

On a Jewish national level, the Holocaust mandated an ethical legacy (much like Fackenheim’s 614th commandment) not to hand Hitler a posthumous victory – meaning the Jewish people are now mandated to survive and flourish. The state of Israel is the means through which this mandate can be realized. It is the ‘need,’ the instrumental necessity of power, that is at the heart of the Zionist project and dream. It is not just the state of Israel that functions in this role but also the manifestation of individual initiative and the assumption of power. The Third Era mandates a human assumption of power: the Holocaust was a result of human failure to enact this imperative. In this thesis, I outlined how Greenberg envisions this principle and how it plays out in reality. I explored the question of how Greenberg’s principle of power assumption (which prima facie seems to be an anathema to his pluralist postmodern theology) still holds a central place in his thought. I argued that the centrality of this principle substantiates my contention that Greenberg is – at heart – a pragmatist rather than a postmodernist.

The final area in which Greenberg’s postmodern theology displays pragmatist themes is in his appropriation of meliorism. A function of classic pragmatism, meliorism distinguishes pragmatism from the often-adverse conclusions of postmodernism. If discontinuity characterizes postmodernism, then engagement characterizes pragmatism. In the same way, Greenberg’s postmodern theology leans heavily toward constructive rather than deconstructive motifs, and with engagement rather than discontinuity.

3. Axiomatic between Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and postmodern thought

In the final part of this thesis, I sought to validate my general overall position of the symbiotic relationship between Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought and postmodern theology. As I have emphasized on numerous occasions throughout this thesis, no thinker can be unilaterally aligned with one group of thought without risking reductionism. However, for the purposes of advancing this thesis, I have tried to harness the variant themes present in each school by highlighting their exposure in Greenberg’s work as a means of revealing the connection between Greenberg’s post-Holocaust and postmodern thought. Greenberg occupies a unique voice and position in the post-Holocaust oeuvre; his thought straddles a complex position of Orthodox mooring and radical theological rupture. What emerges in Greenberg’s work are notions of moment faith and the VC – both of which contain dialectical elements of hope and despair, destruction, and redemption. It is this constant oscillation between a postmodern nihilism and cautious, pragmatic optimism that peppers much of Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought and forms the central thesis of his later religious theology.

In this thesis, I argued that Greenberg’s self-labeled ‘postmodern’ religious theology stems from his equating pluralism with postmodernism. In unpacking typical postmodernism and its American equivalent – pragmatism – it becomes clear that Greenberg’s religious theology shares many more features with American pragmatism than it does with Continental postmodernism.

I posited that Greenberg follows a similar schematized trajectory to pragmatism and postmodernism, wherein pragmatism (though chronologically prior) comes to redeem the negative corollaries of postmodernism. Greenberg’s initial encounter with the Holocaust and his early post-Holocaust thought is riddled with adverse themes of postmodernism – rupture, discontinuity, and anti-foundationalism. However, the latent redemptive and melioristic motifs begin to occupy a more central place in Greenberg’s later ‘postmodern’ theology. Themes such as fallibilism, contingency, and meliorism allow for a more constructive theology and facilitate the integration of post-Holocaust rupture into a fruitful life-affirming Jewish theology.

The three central pillars of Greenberg’s thought – the notion of upholding the *tzelem Elokim* of each individual, the triumph of life, and the mechanism of *brit-*covenant – help to frame and contextualize all that follows. The Holocaust is the supreme example of where the first two principles were radically ignored and violated. The ethical imperative in a post-Holocaust world is to raise them once more to the status they deserve. Covenant is the mechanism through which Jews fulfill this mandate. Living in the third era means that Jews are now the senior partners in the covenant between man and God; thus, it is up to us to bring about a redeemed reality. Halakha is the mechanism through which that reality can be procured, but it will require human initiative and interpretation to uphold the principle of life and dignity. This requirement will demand religious courage and a critical revision of the Halakhic system to lead to an embracing of pluralism so as to ensure the correct checks and balances are in place against abuse of the system. This effort will also necessitate an expansion of the religious consciousness to recognize a ‘holy secularity;’ that is: to acknowledge that the movement toward redeeming life/redemption can emerge from outside the narrow religious prism.

In this thesis, I argued that Greenberg’s use of the term ‘postmodern’ to describe his theology is not philosophically accurate and that critics would do better in terming Greenberg’s thought ‘ethical postmodernism’ or – more appropriately – “religious pragmatism” allied, as it were, to the classic version of American pragmatism. Furthermore, I contended that the meliorism that is characteristic of American pragmatism is what ensures Greenberg’s thought does not spiral into radical theology. At its conception, Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought was filtered through an American purview. Though his thought incorporates strong deconstructionist and theologically-fragmenting elements, it still takes place within the American framework. This means that Greenberg’s thought contains an internal filter, whether consciously or not, that is one step removed from the European reaction. This American nexus grounds and infiltrates every element of Greenberg’s post-Holocaust thought, and it is the basis for its dialectical – and sometimes contradictory – elements of hopelessness and hopefulness, destruction and redemption, shattering and rebuilding.

In the last section of this thesis, I offered an analysis of the three themes mentioned above and unpacked how they pepper Greenberg’s journey from his post-Holocaust to postmodern theology. The primary motif – *brit ­–* is commissioned as the mechanism that moves Greenberg from postmodern deconstructionism to pragmatist meliorism. The VC, his central and most celebrated and critiqued post-Holocaust concept, reflects most accurately a kind of metamodern theory that marries elements of PM with American pragmatism.

1. See *The Jewish Way*  and  *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Of Dreamers 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)