

Heresy or Barbarism

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Crisis: the phenomenon, and indeed the term, appear to characterize our modern age, our historical time. Yet the frequency of its invocation has led to a certain banality in its use, rendering it a trite refrain. For history to move forward and pass from one era to the next, crises must occur, as a springboard or an axle upon which it turns. Yet the more crises proliferate in our world, the more their normativity becomes trivial, concealing their critical foundations and their very function, making it seem as if they emerge and disappear without holding particular significance for our time — without truly challenging us, without meaningfully altering the course of history, regardless of whether that course tends toward progress or decline. Today, the global citizen moves from one crisis to the next at the rhythm of scrolling, taking crises seriously only insofar as they have an unfortunate impact on his or her standard of living — an impact that is, admittedly, increasingly frequent. Massacres, wars, genocides, migration tragedies, pandemics, and natural disasters may implicate or affect the individual to varying degrees; but for these to count as crises in the ordinary sense, they must be translated into financial terms or into the language of the market. The latest example is the current "oil crisis."

Far beyond its mere financial effects, what has been happening since October 7, 2023, across the Middle East and the West — and indeed across the entire world — carries the significance of a crisis for us. This assertion is the point of departure for the al-Zman forum and for our research program. That very assertion, however, can only be granted this role on condition that we answer the three questions it contains: what is a crisis? What is specific about the one we are living through? And who are we?

Although a crisis cannot be reduced to its mere financial significance, it nonetheless operates a certain kind of translation: when the number of victims, the scale of disaster, or the extent of damage translates into a qualitative leap in consciousness. The reality of events — with its dry tone, with its cruel glare — marks a threshold in the way we conceive of the world and relate to it. It thereby gives an unprecedented intensity, a fateful urgency, to the questions that this world — or our relationship to it — poses for us. These questions can no longer be neglected or repressed, circumvented through compromises with the status quo; nor can they be answered by provisional adjustments. The critical state of the world finds its counterpart in the critical state of our consciousness and our thought. A crisis occurs when a short-circuit takes place between these two states.

Getting out of this situation therefore requires the courage to confront our fundamental questions; not to suspend them, but first to formulate them plainly and to come up with clear answers to them, deciding one way or another. Which is to say that every crisis, to be such, constitutes a *moment* of questioning. A moment that becomes a tribunal insofar as it fully engages the decision, the choice, and the judgment of those who are questioned — a moment that each and every one passes through as if brought before the tribunal of history, albeit history with a small h!

What is truly at stake, and the real risk, of such a moment have been perceived by no one better than those who lived through the major crises of the past — as was the case with Hannah Arendt. A crisis, she said, makes the coming catastrophe directly dependent on a primordial choice made in the present. The choice, on the part of those being questioned, to carry on as before, to act as if nothing had happened — that is, to keep answering

questions brought to a critical, incandescent state with ready-made ideas, with prejudices, with off-the-shelf formulas. Or, on the contrary, to face the evidence that this way of treating questions will produce exactly the opposite effects; that it would be the surest way to prepare the conditions of possibility for the great catastrophe and to worsen its consequences¹.

The choice thus engages even the very meaning of the questions the crisis confronts us with. This is the moment when choosing between just and unjust coincides as closely as possible — even merges — with the decision about the meaning of each. Not only the means of avoiding loss or achieving salvation, but such a choice simultaneously bears upon the meaning of the dilemma itself and its terms. It is, as one can see, as objective as it is subjective. For in times of crisis, every choice about questions, every decision about their meaning or their answers, constitutes *eo ipso* an existential choice, a decision about the meaning one gives to one's own life.

What questions are we talking about, precisely? This inquiry leads us to the specificity of our crisis — the one that unfolds between October 7 and the current war waged by the United States and Israel against Iran. Now, this crisis is intimately linked with the Islamic, the Jewish, and the Christian; and to all the diverse, heterogeneous, even contradictory elements — including secular ones — that have historically come to be associated with each of these three adjectives. More precisely, it implicates the Islamic and the Jewish directly, and the Christian from a distance, as its backdrop.

¹ See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, 2006, chaps. 4 and 5.

If one adopts this perspective, the crisis becomes differently readable: it lies in the relationship that the Islamic, the Jewish, and the Christian maintain today with the political in the modern sense of the term. A relationship that certainly takes three different forms, but which in each case is a construction internal to modernity, shaped through a long historical process. And if such a relationship lies at the foundation of this crisis, it is because it is itself a profoundly critical relationship.

First, there is the fact that, in a field of conflict extending from Gaza to Paris, Berlin, and New York by way of Jerusalem, Beirut, and Tehran, the overdetermining role of religion has never been revealed so clearly in war and peace, nor in politics as such. The prefix "over-" can no longer mislead, and this is precisely one of the consequences of this crisis. For it proves to be a crisis that is as theological as it is political, particularly with regard to the two religions most directly concerned — Islam and Judaism. What appears as their explosive confrontation expresses above all the relationship —between the theological and the political within each of the two religions, a relationship which has become problematic, eminently critical in both.

But a great lesson of this crisis — one I have just alluded to — is the revelation of the inadequacy of referring to religion, to Judaism, to Islam, and even to Christianity as so many religions, in order to explain a phenomenon that is, all things considered, recent, fluctuating, and multidimensional, one that continually escapes us — and that escapes us above all the moment one tries to interrogate its entanglement with the political and the social. I therefore prefer to designate it by three terms: the Islamic, the Jewish, and the Christian. This recalls above all the different meaning that the concept of religion takes on within Islam, Judaism, and Christianity respectively, notwithstanding their

common monotheistic foundation or the Abrahamic paradigm of belief they share.

More broadly, making use of these substantivized adjectives helps us to better disentangle hidden dimensions of the phenomenon and to grasp their interconnection. Together, they form a conceptual tool that is perhaps more dynamic and appropriate, allowing us to understand how the Islamic, Jewish, or Christian “fact” (*fait*) exceeds the simple framework of a belief or a form of worship, a theology, a form of life, an identity affiliation, or even an intellectual tradition — embracing all of these at once.

With regard to our crisis directly, this tool can help us to distinguish more explicitly the Christian palimpsest concealed behind the State, the nation, society, and the politics of the moderns, and to account for the permanence of its action. Through it, we should revisit the participation — whether historical or at an archaeological level — of the Jewish and the Islamic in such concepts or components of modernity; and again address, but from a new angle, the recalcitrant question of their compatibility with these concepts, its limits and its modalities.

One must ask how nationalism — a modern concept — has articulated itself with the Jewish and the Islamic. Colonialism and decolonial resistance, immigration and exile, integration and separatism, antisemitism, anti-Zionism, or Islamophobia: none of these, either, relate so much to Judaism and Islam as religions, traditions, and so forth, as to the Jewish and the Islamic as adjectives.

What singularizes the current crisis is that it confronts us with the questions that thus bear, first and foremost, on the Jewish and the Islamic. The decision it compels us to make likewise concerns the meaning of such questions and the

answers we will bring to them. We no longer have a choice: everything is called into question, and nothing is more inadequate, more obsolete, or above all more counterproductive than to neglect their now critical significance and to believe one can answer them by brandishing the same arguments as before.

What is a Jewish nation-state? What is a Muslim nation-state? What is Judaism, beyond a nationalist ideology? What is Islam other than a totalitarian obsession, a meta-national ideology? What is a Jew? What is a Muslim? What is a goy? What is a non-Muslim? And even these: what exactly does the adjective "Jewish" mean? What does the adjective "Islamic" mean? We perceive in them the chain of signifiers already familiar to us — and yet the crisis, like a semantic mutation, has acted as if their identity had been reduced to a near-homonymy!

Among the long questionnaire that thus unfolds before us, one question stands out insofar as it pertains to the crisis in an essential way — that is, by participating in its very essence, which is a temporal essence. It refers to the relationship that the Islamic, the Jewish, and the Christian maintain with time and the temporal. Which is to say that it has a deep connection with messianism in its three Islamic, Jewish, and Christian modalities. The question presents itself to us at once in these terms: where do we stand today, in this crisis, at the heart of the ongoing war, with respect to Jewish, Christian, and Islamic messianisms? They are all the more called into question insofar as they come to intersect with one another, and all with the modern, secular regime of temporality — jointly constituting this crisis as a historical moment, a moment in our history common to us all.

The same war, among its winners as among its losers, is already provoking, as its immediate effect, a crisis in their conception of the messianic future. The religious Zionist interprets the victorious offensive of the “Jewish state” as a decisive threshold crossed toward the imminent establishment of the messianic reign. The Shi'ite messianist, once convinced of the messianic mission of the Islamic Republic, now discovers in the concrete possibility of that very State's defeat the clearest divine sign of the end of time and the promise of the victorious arrival of the Savior — i.e. the hidden Imâm. For the American evangelical, the victory of the State of Israel and the collapse of the Iranian state both serve the divine plan in its final phase, according to Christian messianism: the supposedly Jewish and Muslim contributions to the ultimate chaos whose exceptional coincidence portends the imminent return of the Messiah King!

This new disruption, introduced into the temporal frameworks of the three messianisms, is nonetheless merely a surface effect compared to the deep anchoring of the current crisis in the messianic vision of the world. For a crisis within this or that messianism is one thing; a messianic crisis in and of itself is another. And ours is indeed the latter. In the sense that our time is one in which Jew, Muslim, Christian, Iranian, Gazan, Palestinian, Arab, Israeli each end up as the antichrist of the other. This crisis is ultimately the crisis of all those who discover themselves to be the antichrist of their neighbor.

Here is the messianic essence of our crisis. But here too is what leads us back to the original conception of crisis within the Abrahamic religions. Our crisis thus is revealed to be an Abrahamic crisis par excellence — a crisis that announces the imminence of the Final Judgment. The great decision required by such a crisis is nothing short of an act of conversion. Conversion imposes

itself as the one and only *sine qua non* condition of salvation². One wonders why this messianic insistence on conversion — an insistence shared by all three Abrahamic religious traditions, all three monotheistic and each exclusivist in its own way; an insistence that is as theological as it is political. Is it not because, in the end, every Abrahamic conversion consists in choosing one's antichrist?

Strangely enough — though no doubt because of its messianic character — today's crisis reproduces the same archaic pattern. It confronts its subjects with the same choice, the same dilemma. Indeed, all those whom the crisis calls upon to convert become its subjects. Muslims and Jews — by lineage or by culture, observant or secular, modern or even ultramodern — the crisis has assigned them all their Muslim or Jewish identity as if through an act of conversion. Although unavoidable, the initial choice was tyrannically simple: either convert, or deny the existence of the crisis.

"We" are among those who chose not to deny the crisis, by assuming its subjectivizing effect. Yet it appeared to us from the outset that the true choice was concealed behind the innocent simplicity of the other term of the dilemma; that it is precisely around this term that both all the peril and all the salvation this kind of crisis holds in store for us are concentrated. For, convert to what? That is the whole question.

To convert to the series of prejudices associated with the adjectives "Jewish" and "Islamic"? To the dominant conception of Islam and Judaism as religions, to the discursive forms that have historically imposed themselves on their theologies or intellectual traditions? Or to the worldview adopted by the

² On the relationship between messianic crisis in the biblical sense and conversion, see Reinhart Koselleck, "Crisis," trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2006), pp. 357–400. In the Islamic context, it remains essentially the same; see Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2010.

majority of those who bear the name of Jew or Muslim? In that case, conversion would mean nothing other than choosing the easy path of answering questions with ready-made answers — answers provided in the past or by one's ancestors. Believing in the received word as the key to deciphering the present crisis, in its already-promised future; believing in one's bones in a divine Messiah who must appear on the ruins as the sole Savior. Believing all of this, which in fact means to sidestep the crisis, to better forget its concretely critical stakes, to forget critique altogether by taking refuge behind the hegemonic word transmitted in the name of tradition, collective memory, if not in the name of a primordial revelation. Conceived in this traditional sense — itself tied to Abrahamic messianisms — conversion contains something fundamentally belligerent: converting in order to form a community, to make a camp, to form a front. And the ultimate objective, we already know it: together with the members of one's community and beside them, to designate the enemy; in keeping with their choice, to choose one's antichrist.

It is by taking conversion in this sense that those very people who denounced the injustice of the powerful imperialist or colonizer sought refuge not simply in the Islamic tradition, but behind its hegemonic voices. We have seen how, in the name of resistance, they adopted its most reactionary readings — sources of all manner of injustices. Or the very same people who filled our ears, in their speeches and their courses, with the beauties of the radically self-critical gesture of the prophets of Israel — these same people were metamorphosed, through crisis, into increasingly shameless apologists for the worst of what the State of Israel has committed. They wanted to keep the critical voice alive among their people; through their conversion, they became the mere echo — indeed the amplifier — of the loudest and most strident voices dominating it, including when those voices express fascist leanings.

Our choice is a different one. It is not a matter, as has just been said, of remaining indifferent to the crisis's injunction, to the messianic peril and promise it carries within it. Yet the fatal error to be avoided seems to us to lie precisely there: that, in the urgency of the crisis, one forgets the principal choice: what meaning to give to conversion itself. This question has led us to the following observation: taking conversion in its ancestral and consecrated sense, it goes hand in hand with catastrophe, with the barbarism that consists in the competitive hunt for antichrists — for everyone identified in turn with the Nazis.

We are therefore those who, before converting, decided to stop before the question "what is conversion?" in order to reformulate it in the light of the crisis. And, beyond our respective orientations, positions, and trajectories, whatever our relationship to the Jewish and the Islamic, we arrived at the same conclusion: there is only one salutary choice, and it is to redefine conversion by turning inside out the meaning dictated by the Abrahamic traditions. In short, the only conversion worthy of the stakes of this crisis would be, in our view, neither more nor less than an "anti-conversion." The decisive bifurcation takes place on this point — between those who, propelled by the crisis, decide to convert, and those others who take the oblique path of anti-conversion, as if to subvert the apocalyptic thrust of the crisis.

Taken in this sense, anti-conversion is not the simple negation of conversion. It is not identified with apostasy, nor with atheism. It is neither quite a return to the Jewish and the Islamic, nor their rejection. Through the oblique movement it performs, anti-conversion diagonalizes this dichotomy — it aims to deactivate the boundaries between inside and outside. We set ourselves the task, before

and beyond any other, of reinventing the link each of us has to the Jewish or to the Islamic. Yes — to harness the Jewish and Islamic intellectual traditions, even to attempt to reappropriate them, not so much to find refuge in them as to seek new resources there. The choice of anti-conversion imposes itself on us thusly — as the appropriate gesture of a thought that is free, fully free, and at the same time engaged in this crisis.

The comparison of the Jewish tradition and the Islamic tradition, the act of summoning them together, of placing them side by side, face to face: we willingly adopt all these approaches. Not to weaponize one tradition against the other, but rather to introduce conflict within each. One who criticizes one tradition solely in the name of the other, who invokes the Jewish to denounce the Islamic or vice versa — that person is performing a conversion. For one who chooses the path of anti-conversion, the critique of one tradition cannot proceed without the critique of the other — in the sense that she introduces the Jewish into the Islamic and vice versa, as if each were the lever of the other's self-critique.

We see how, in this perspective, anti-conversion seeks to reactivate the Jewish and Islamic intellectual traditions. It leads to sorting the elements of each tradition and making choices within it that do not lead toward catastrophe. On the contrary, in order to bring forth new responses, the anti-convert multiplies lateral moves from within. If he thus attempts to reappropriate his tradition, it is because he seeks to wrench it out of a rut by deliberately making it deviate — to reorient it in defiance of the hegemonic direction imposed by the common run of converts, generation after generation. Against their clamor and acclamation, he registers within it a minor voice — a discordant voice that is his own, even as no one can deny its belonging to the tradition.

Does not such an internal choice (*haeresis*), such an invention (*ibdâ'*), such a deviation (*ilhâd*)³, correspond precisely to what has always been excluded, in the name of heresy, from the Jewish and Islamic traditions — not to mention its vast Christian history? The sin of the heretic consists precisely in not yielding on his internal choice. His problem is not how to exit a tradition, a religion, a doctrine. Not only does such a move fail to answer his personal crisis — it also undermines his entire freedom. The heretic is rather like a cat: what bothers him are doors, borders, partitions; he does not like having the trajectory of his movements traced for him in advance.

Conversion is the choice of those who, whatever their outward appearance, are people of belief, even of superstition. They have faith that there exists for them and for their fellow converts a final deliverance. They believe religiously that, until then, the only thing left to them is to hold firm against the antichrist, to wage a battle against him with the help of their states, their atomic bombs, their bombers, or their missiles: nothing but their disguised *katechon* or their fetishes, in truth. The true freethinker, by contrast, is the one who performs anti-conversion — the heretic. He employs his freedom to resist against the hegemonic unity of his tradition⁴. His struggle consists of eliminating from it elements he judges contrary to truth and to the salvation of all — and, to this end, in never ceasing to deconstruct his tradition.

Against the hegemony of the converts' majority voice, we assume the heretical character of our anti-conversions — by definition scattered and in a minor key. One who converts joins a crew, a troop, a crowd — even if that of the

³ The two main charges brought against heretics in the Islamic tradition.

⁴ Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Orthodoxie et hérésie. Le point de vue du théologien," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 18th year, no. 1, 1963, p. 75.

minority. Anti-conversion, by contrast, always marks a departure. The numerical majority or the numerical minority? The anti-convert never stops being wary of this dilemma. What matters to him is to cultivate, as a true heretic, his minor voice, in whatever group he finds himself. He is careful, above all, not to confuse the minor voice with the voice of the minority. Anti-conversion is by definition a solitary gesture. However paradoxical it may appear, the politics of the anti-convert is, in the last resort, the politics of the solitary.

What makes so many solitary voices into a "we" rests on a single conviction: that after all, the fundamental choice of all those called upon by the current crisis, by October 7, by Gaza, by the ongoing war, is a choice between heresy and barbarism. To refuse the necessity of heresy under any pretext whatsoever is to contribute, in fact, to barbarism.