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Messianism and Secularization: What do they mean now?

In order to address the question of messianism, I would like to begin with an empirical observation, simple and incontrovertible: messianism is, today, a main topic of debate. The word comes to us in countless guises and with extremely contrasting assumptions. Numerous political discourses call upon the notion uninhibitedly; we find it in the newspapers we read, in the explanations of certain political analysts and historians, on television and in the more or less authorized commentary, responsible for describing any given concrete situation, past and historical or present and political. One must start then by questioning these multi-form and proliferating usages, the most immediate contexts in which they thrive, as well as the meaning they intend to bring to their focus points, when they invoke – without any prior interrogation – messianism and what it is supposed to signify.

An Objective Teleology

How does one speak of messianism today? What is it meant to say and to describe?

In its forms that I have just mentioned, and which can generally be called journalistic, *messianism* seems to be symptomatically related to, associated with, or even substituted for what we called, in the eighteenth century, fanaticism or intolerance: a messianism against humanity.¹ Phenomena which concern messianism or, better yet, which are loosely explained by messianism are inexhaustible: the kamikazes who blow themselves up in suicide attacks, the call to fraternity from any associative official or supporter of the Third-World, the politics and ideas of American neo-conservatives, the most radical protests of order, communism and the various totalitarianisms supported by utopianisms and rose-tinted views of the future, the contemporary movement of the “indignant” etc. These very heterogeneous phenomena – heterogeneity which is in itself already highly doubtful – would all seem to signal the presence of a messian-

ism, of a mentality which is inaccessible to the clarity of reason or, more elaborately, of an ideology which tries to bring about, with more or less exacerbated violence, a kingdom of ends, a finality of the good, determined by the engagement and the historico-political investment of a religion, a faith, a belief (of which communism is a part), a politics of the Good which is nothing but the mask of a disaster that has always already happened. Without prejudging the soundness of these analyses to which we can surely, in part, subscribe, provided the pseudo-explanative intentions are detached, we cannot help but ask what is meant beneath this contemporary, hackneyed and never in itself explicit, naming of messianism.

In these representations, messianism constitutes the structural schema which animates their descriptive breadth. To begin, it is important to understand its heuristic significance and the efficiency that it seems to lend, to argumentations, which fetishistically call upon the notion. What is it all about? Taken as a whole, or in a global way (as it is only in the global that this messianism can manifest itself), it designates a teleology, a historical structure oriented by an abstract universality, in accordance with a meaning to which it is already predisposed and inherent in the movement of the whole to which it belongs. It would be this meaning, then, that the “messianic” movements and discourses seek to accomplish and bring about in the immediate – the here and now. The future would seem, in this way, to present itself as the self-realization of this meaning in the end, in the ultimate and precipitous unification of ends. This teleology is objective and it should of course be distinguished from the subjective Hegelian teleology. Here, the effectuation of the same structure is meant as a search for liberty by the Spirit, even though the two teleologies intersect at a few instances, which emerge in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, such as organic development, theodicy or providence. This objective teleology known as *messianism* became incorporated at a certain time in ideological and political forms, historically dated and determined: progressivism, the Enlightenment or the “grand narratives” which were of interest to Lyotard. Today, this teleology is recharged or reconverted, by virtue of its great plasticity and its capacity for indefinite vectorialization – to which its very own teleological movement lends itself – into the fanatical messianism of religious fundamentalisms, and all of their politically differentiated versions.

First, a preliminary remark: messianism as objective teleology refers expressly to *secularization* and its conceptuality. In fact, the diverse

forms which I have mentioned are a product of a transfer of expectations belonging to a singular religious hope towards the political realm, with its modes of exercise, its practices, and its constraints. The violence brought on by the temporal forcing of a politics of the Good would be the result therefore of this transfer of the spiritual to the secular or even of the religious past to the political present as such. I would like to attempt to show that the shibboleth which distinguishes between the teleological messianism and other uses² of messianism, as temporal index, resides in the issue of history, in which secularization is at stake, and that Nietzsche has determined, from *The Second Untimely Meditation* to the *Gay Science*, as “the blind power of the real” which “uproots the future.” We can then propose, as a first step, to disjoin what we can call in nominalizing the adjective *the messianic*, or the messianic paradigm, from the teleological usages of messianism – without altogether neglecting the question of knowing what the necessity of this distinction means and why it emerges from the common ground of the same term.

Like the Scorpion and Like the Lost Object

What can we establish if we examine with some care the most original contents of Jewish messianism? And why *Jewish* messianism in particular?

There are of course many other messianisms that are not Jewish: the Portuguese Sebastianism, the African messianisms which await the arrival of a black Messiah, the return of the Shiite Mahdi; there is even, on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean, a messianic movement which awaits the return of an American soldier, a GI who visited during the Second World War and who is still not forgotten. In the variety and multiplicity of phenomena which it encompasses and covers, messianism in the plural, messianisms in the general, designate a structure which is invariably punctuated by three rigorously articulated or continued phases: whole presence/sudden absence/inevitable return; He was here undoubtedly, He has disappeared, He will come back sooner or later. Jewish messianism would seem alien to this structural cycle and, more profoundly, to the representation of a return; it is, on the contrary, more attentive to the idea of sudden and unexpected arrival, without assigned provenance.

Why pay particular attention to this in my discussion? First off, for culturally and historically evident reasons, Jewish messianism has often

been considered the matrix of philosophies of history, where it may have become in a certain way diluted via Christianity. These philosophies or ontologies of history have often instituted themselves more or less explicitly the heirs of Jewish messianism or have shown themselves as such. There is a significant difficulty here for a notion of the messianic which attempts to discern, on the contrary, an effective counterpoint to the philosophies of history. Here again, it is history, which diverts and separates. We have largely believed that Jewish messianism was at the source of a *Heilsgeschichte*, that is a history oriented towards the promise of salvation and redemption, namely that of secularization, which is at least the understanding of Karl Löwith. In fact, Löwith understands secularization as the transposition and the immanentization of the Christian *eschaton* in the philosophies of history, with their concept of progress and their nontranscendable horizon, which is man's redemption in a humanity that has made amends with itself. Therefore, Jewish messianism would seem to be the determined origin and place of birth of all "who sought their salvation as a process," as Nietzsche says. However, there is something most originally in Jewish messianism which strikes me as very far from "salvation as a process."

In the interest of brevity, I will highlight three singular traits of Jewish messianism whereby the general hypothesis of secularization proves to be troublesome: a relation to the immemorial, a relation to instantaneity and a relation, strictly concomitant, to acting in the moment.

1. The first trait implies, again, the question of history. From the messianic perspective, history, that which happens (as the Messiah must necessarily arrive in and outside of history), is not determined in advance nor is it predetermined rationally. The arrival of the Messiah is an effectuality which is immediately arriving, a sudden reality – which cannot be preceded by any potentiality. In a way, it is the event of events, a reality without any possibility which would predict it. The Messiah will come, so says the Talmud, as unexpectedly as one finds a lost object or discovers a scorpion in one's shoe (Sanhedrin 97 a).

2. Hence a certain type of relation to the moment: the Messiah can arrive at any time, he can come through the small door of any instant. And this upsets the compossibility of time, of the three exclusive dimensions of time. Even the respect for the law is held, in essence, within this original instantaneity. In truth, to respect the law is to maintain a relation to its living instantaneity (which is the difficulty of every observance). At every

moment, one must act as if the Torah had just been given, at that very instant. Every moment, then, contains or is held as if it could contain the entirety of time, as if in a state of envelopment.

3. This “as if” (“one must act at every moment,” writes Rosenzweig, “as if the destiny of humanity depended on it”) is determinant for human action – which will be considered from an ethical-practical and temporal perspective rather than a historical or political-historical one. Because that which happens, which is begotten and which is perpetuated throughout generations, history can never exhaust its possibilities. It can never in its own correspond to its actualizations and be perfectly adequate to its concept. There is something in history which is acting, a sort of principle of invisible action, but which is *more than* history. Nietzsche explains that history always serves a “non-historical power,” or for him “life” – but that art and religion also belong to these supra-historical “forces.” Nietzsche’s position is of interest because it is strategically remarkable. It constitutes, in fact, the most powerful antidote to messianism (teleological) and is at the same time in an authentic proximity to the messianic as “sensibility,” if we may call it so, in a common and immediate acceptance. Nietzsche does not deny history or historicity, its efficiency or weight. On the contrary, they hold for him an undeniable counter-metaphysical force. But he strives to think of them above what they are, as “service,” which subordinates them to something else (“life”), in a very anti-historicist way. This is how the messianic enters into a sort of selective affinity (selective, of course, because it is not after “life”) with Nietzsche. As “sensibility,” then, in a larger yet intensified meaning, messianism attentively prepares for this “more than history” which passes through history itself, more or less imperceptibly. This brings about: the impossibility of acting’s deferral, in accordance with historical necessity, and the impossibility of its being subsumed in a general theory of the structures of historicity.

The three preceding points, cursively noted, mark the indispensable distinction, which I propose between *secularized messianism in an objective teleology* and the *temporalized messianic in an extra-historicity*. This difference is reiterated in a whole series of contrasts which I can only indicate here: cumulative, linear and homogeneous time, *different* than the open, unpredictable, interrupted time; politics articulated with specific places and natural subjects on which an extrinsic rationally is superimposed, *different* than a limited politics, disautonomized and primitive; and history, especially, as there is a historiophilia of progressive messianism which counts the

“moments” of historical process according to their ascending curve, very *different* than the messianic historiophobia, which combines a refusal of historical thought as “a single and unique catastrophe” (Benjamin) and the expectation of an extra-historical propulsion which would disrupt history in an effective temporality, unraveling its ontological substance on which philosophies are hinged.

I would like to pause here briefly on the paragraph entitled “messianic politics” of the third part of the *Star of Redemption* in order to better determine the articulation or disarticulation of messianism and secularization.³ The contents of this passage are very rich and I will not mention them in great detail. I would simply like to grasp the central meaning with respect to messianism. These paragraphs from the *Star* must be read, I believe, as a modest theory of secularization. “Messianic” signifies here “secularized,” secularized messianism in the Johannic events of History. Rosenzweig’s version of secularization is very singular. Here, secularization is analyzed according to an *inverted* model concerning some habitual themes I mentioned earlier, and this model is itself determined by Rosenzweig’s conception of temporality and historical time. Quite suitably, the process of secularization is described, at least since Schmitt and even in a good number of his critics, to say it in broad terms, as the transfer of passed categories (theological, religious) towards the political sphere, the sphere of presence and topicality, of disenchanted and secular modernity. The weakness of this analysis, it can be said in passing, is that it does not help to explain why religions still remain prevalent, in spite of their frenzied secularization, and in a totally different mode than the recurrent “return” of the religious, which is simply used as a name for that which cannot withstand rigorous thought. Rosenzweig also analyzes modern politics as a secularized form, a trans-formation or a trans-figuration, but not of the religious into the historical, of the ancient into the modern, of past into present, of theology into politics. On the contrary, secularization would only be possible and attainable from the instance of redemption, from the what-is-to come of the world. Redemption, understood as a category of time, or as an existential of the created *Dasein*, engages a reflection on mimetic secularization. War, revolution and the State are metamorphed and rival forces of the Apocalypse, the Messiah and the messianic globalization of the World. This reversal and this determined secularization as transfiguration of the future are only conceivable from the dynamic premise which is put forward by the Rosenzweigian conception of his-

tory and extra-historicity. For the author of the *Star*, the movements of the present are not only propelled by a past which would *push* (*Stoß*) history continually forward, progressively and linearly, but also towed by the future which *attracts* (*Zug*) the present. This principle of attraction from the future is key to the process of secularization and also the source of messianism's ambiguity, of which I spoke earlier. Messianism is subject to a temporality in which every instant takes precedence over duration and opens (or does not open) time. This is the temporality in question, because at every moment the future can swallow the present whole. Messianism is therefore random, it is "only possible", and it is bound to this possibility of time, of the moment, as Rosenzweig states in his correspondence. Thus, the messianic schema makes its entry in the paragraph of the third part of the *Star* as political, secularized messianism of the "peoples of the world."

He incorporates something of a "point of view of redemption" (messianism and/or secularization), which is double and closely tied together. It is in relation to this historical tangency of the two "points of view" that the possibility of messianism's disaster takes on meaning. As we know, secularization begets a historicization of messianism, that is, its attraction to a history of the future, by future represented as history, and no longer as a tension of the moment and of eternity. Once entered into history, secularized messianism takes on the risk of being implicated in the sinister and mimetic rivalry of the State and of its annals – which can also, in certain conjunctures, contribute to the attraction of the present to the future. Rosenzweig gives the example of election. The notion of election is theological because of its dynamic expression of an economy of salvation. But if election attempts to become "realized" in history, it can also be transformed into crime, "*Tat des Täters*."⁴ European wars, and in particular the war of 1914–1918, coincide with rival and opposed "elections," nationalisms which, in the precise conjuncture of 1914, are secularized forms of "messianism." War appears to be the effect of the violent and homicidal clash between concurrent messianic-secularized ambitions: vocation of a given nation for the universality of a global mission, election for civilization, supreme appeal, transmission to a given people of a role of benefactor for humanity. The messianic is therefore the confluence of radically opposed appropriations. Either we can think of the messianic according to the model of progressive development of the reabsorption of differences of which We as nationals are the agents, or even according

to the model of a secularization which continually absorbs the religious. Or, again, it determines historicity “catastrophically,” on the mode of an unpredictable instantaneity, of an apocalyptic moment, that is to say, of a threat carried by the attraction of the present to the future; the threat of the “scorpion.”

Justice and the Instant

On these grounds, what can we truly identify as messianic in its major elaborations of the 20th century, in Rosenzweig, of course, but also in Bloch, Benjamin, Levinas and others? In spite of the strong heterogeneity which characterizes their thought, their messianic vein channels, in each case differently, a determined structure of human temporality, where time is at once endured patiently, in a lasting expectation, and in which it is parsed by an ever-lasting impatience. This structure of human temporality that the messianic brings about and creates is universal. It relates to a universal experience of temporality which, in a way, makes up the ontological depth of consciousness. Transcendence towards the future, of which expectation is constituted, also penetrates the very presence of expectation. Consciousness is nothing but the purity of this expectation, which does not await the expectable, but which is constantly predicting, before we can even become aware of the object of our consciousness. Levinas names this universal structure “the expectancy without expected return.” It is intricately related to an experience (in a very different way than Hegel or Hegelianism) of temporality, of expectation, of the exposure to the event. It disarticulates uniformly causal and homogeneous time and lets the moment shine with an unexpected radiance. Every moment, in fact, may be unique. But not necessarily. Rosenzweig proposes to distinguish between bridge-like moments – which assure the monotonous and successive continuity of time – and springboard-like moments – which propel outside this quotidian line of duration. This is a purely analytical distinction, not a practical one, because the springboard-like moment resembles very much the bridge-like moment, almost to a tee. A certain *messianic action* is lodged within this necessary and indeterminable distinction. The moment undoubtedly signifies the separation of a past and a future, but positively and perhaps even propulsive, and not in an Aristotelian evanescence, for example. The moment signifies a sort of *here-and-now* which would be at the same

time a *not-yet*, which is unconstructable and open; open because of its unconstructedness.

We may be able to elaborate on the issue by weaving in Bloch's "un-constructable moment of the lived" with Derrida's "indeconstructibility of justice". In a messianic point of view, there is an evident parallel between instantaneity and justice. The expectation without aim, the awaiting of the unawaitable, imposes a double constraint, a double characteristic – because it is not really an "expectation". 1) The Messiah does not allow for political transposition or historical transit because he is exterior to any program or predetermination; he is exterior to the political, or more exactly, outside of the political realm as per political philosophy. The reign that he establishes is not a reign amongst the kingdoms of nations, a history, but it is a reign of justice without borders. The history of the philosophical histories, this "blind power of the real," "suffocates the insistent meaning of justice," as Nietzsche would say. 2) Moreover, this hinders the indifferent and static expectation (messianism is always confronted with a double limit and peril, passive expectation and frenzied activism). In fact, if the Messiah could come at any moment, that which happens in the moment, is the coming itself. One must then be ready, at every moment, to respond, to act an ethical-practical action, which will exceed politics but which will conversely find and invent a return to politics. Politics must be pursued "nonetheless," or in other terms, in knowing politics' narrow limits (Rosenzweig), one can scarcely leave "politics to itself," without abandoning it to its own "tyranny." (Levinas) *Politics can never be left to its own devices*. In the aforementioned passage of the *Second Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche pays homage to those who have fought *against history*, who have "acted in a non-historical way," in order to maintain the vivacity of the insistent demands of justice. Not to leave politics to its own devices is, therefore, to fight messianistically against those who Nietzsche calls "historical spirits," suffocating justice.

I return now to the question I started with earlier: why and how do we speak of messianism today?

We can certainly speak of a particular metaphysical-historical conjuncture for today's context. The collapse of the grand narratives, the disappearance of communism, and the globalization of the world surely overwhelm the discourse on messianism today, even if this happens more or less indirectly. Has messianism emblematically announced a meaning of history, which has since been disoriented, struck by unintelligibility? Has it been

the eminent figure of teleology or of an annunciation, exhausted in and by the West? Has it functioned as the index of all secularization? Confronted with these questions (the legitimacy of which is contestable), I would say that, on these historical and metaphysical grounds, we are dealing with a double and ambiguous movement. On the one hand, messianism is rife with meaning; it is trivially hyperactive in the promise of a reign of the Good, in the conversion of everyone, in an often violent politics. It presents itself or imposes itself as the objective teleology I discussed at the beginning, which must of course be “understood” but which does not dispense us of being attentive to other meanings. Because it is the *messianic*, on the contrary, which affects today’s thought, be it intentionally or indirectly, clearly or obscurely: by the mediation of time that accompanies it, as well as by the determination of the “essence” of man, as demanded for by the justice to come. The messianic implicates politics by the request of an ethical-practical immediacy which would supersede mediations, procedures and dialectics. Furthermore, in this political-philosophical bond of the temporality of time and the necessity of the just, it signifies that the “end of history” and the beginning of “globalization” shed light on each other “messianistically” in their remarkable overlapping and their fruitful contestation of each other.

By the messianic, therefore, *something happens* to philosophy, to politics, to thought and to action – something which, we can conjecture, is not ready to cease. With the messianic, it is not a question of simply deploying knowledge which would belong to history or the sociology of religions, nor to even any particular thinker. We are rather very much obligated, by the questions it raises, to open philosophy and politics not only to their ethical or anthropological dimensions, but – may we say in a deliberately daring manner – to its metaphysical dimensions. The messianic can then be compared to a projectile that can be directed towards the great beings of philosophy and the ideas of political action. It is not forbidden to expect the arrival of a *Befremdung*, one Nietzsche calls upon to command action against “the historical meaning,” – “historical culture.” It is very much this feeling of estrangement towards history whose abandon is, according to him, accompanied by that of surprise and deadly resignation (“to no longer be surprised by anything, is to support everything,” he writes). It is this *estrangement to history in history* which the messianic seeks to revitalize.

Translated by Richard Spavin.

Notes

- 1 This is what Albert Camus takes note of in his *Journaux de voyage*, Paris: Gallimard, 1978, 46 : “The idea of messianism at the base of all fanaticisms. Messianism against humanity” – an idea which he opposes to the anhistoricity of “Greek thought.”
- 2 The reader may refer to the distinction I proposed in the introduction of *Le temps messianique. Temps historique et temps vécu* (Paris: Vrin, 2001) between three assumptions of the term messianism based on three modes of temporality: eschatological time, teleological time and interruptive time (p. 12).
- 3 See Franz ROSENZWEIG, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Halo, Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, 328-334.
- 4 See The letter to Hans Ehrenberg on September 26th 1910: Rosenzweig determines History as “*Tat des Täters*”, which means “act of the actor,” but in the meaning of a *crime*, and he adds, in a maxim almost Kafkaesque: “*every act transforms into sin wherever it enters into History (the actor did not want what happened.*” (Franz ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 112 – italized by myself).