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Review of Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe.*

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Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 136 pp. ISBN 9780231147842.

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This slim volume of a hundred pages is in large part structured as an interview with Julia Kristeva conducted by Carmine Donzelli, Kristeva's editor at Donzelli Editore, Rome, the first publisher of the book. The preface is in the form of a letter written to her French editor, Frederic Boyer; one chapter is a written version of a Lenten Lecture delivered at Notre Dame de Paris in March of 2006 and was originally a discussion between Kristeva and Anne-Marie Pelletier on the subject of "Suffering"; and there are two small final chapters entitled "The Genius of Catholicism" and "Don't Be Afraid of European Culture," both in homage to Pope Jean Paul II.

Kristeva's genius has been, in large part, her ability to speak as well as to write; to be an active part of the polis as well as a philosopher and linguist; to be a theorist and a practitioner of psychoanalysis; to be a novelist and an outspoken advocate for the handicapped. She has put into practice her belief that psychoanalysis is a revolutionary force that works at the level of the individual psyche to transform political praxis and shift it away from the axis of totalitarian power—the violence of religious fundamentalism as well as the dehumanizing "automation" of secularization—in the direction of individual creativity and what she calls "diverse practices" of the signifying arts. Kristeva's impressive body of work began with her linguistic and semiotic theorizing of the psyche-soma in texts such as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, *Powers of Horror*, *Black Sun* and *Tales of Love*, and moved to biographies of female genius in Hannah Arendt, Colette, and Melanie Klein. Her work has concerned itself with the semiotic ground of speech and language, as well as with the interiorization of the law and the resultant emphasis on individual subjectivity and plurality of meaning that began with the discourse of Christianity and proceeded through Renaissance Humanism, culminating in modernity and the discourse of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Readers of Kristeva's previous work will not necessarily learn new information in this little book, but will be exposed to an impressive and dense crystallization of her religious and psychoanalytic thought, focused on the problematics of belief itself. This distinction between belief as a necessary human acquisition, as opposed to particular religious dogma and practice, is often elided in the discourses that take up the subject of faith, but is crucial to the psychoanalytic perspective that Kristeva brings to bear on the religious and political crises of our times.

Belief, then, as Kristeva defines it, is in the purview of psychoanalysis because it provides the pre-linguistic and trans-linguistic grounding for speech itself. It draws on the pre-Oedipal "loving father of pre-history" (Freud's term) as the guarantor of the symbolic existence of the infant: neither the Oedipal father of prohibition nor the "lawful" paternal function that Lacan theorized, but a loving father who is also maternal, with the "attributes of both parents." For Kristeva, recall, the maternal and paternal exist as co-habitants of the psyche, as synchronous structures even as they move through time. This hypothesized loving father is the third party who acknowledges "the symbolic being of the newborn" well before the Oedipal stage initiates her access to the Symbolic. The "need to believe," then, is the need to experience this "direct and immediate" relationship with the father, an experience that must precede signification, but is the

necessary ground for signification. Again, Kristeva is using Freud's words here, as he tried to grapple with the meaning of the "oceanic feeling" that he himself denied ever feeling. Contemporary psychoanalytic apologists for religion have faulted Freud on this point for overlooking what would seem the obvious connection to the mother, the maternal. But Kristeva is most definite on this point as well, that this mystical feeling of relatedness, of unmediated experience, is in fact rooted in the "capacity to signify," a paternal and not a maternal capacity. Otherwise, there is no recognition, no sense of "otherness" to which one can relate; there is only the undifferentiated matrix and no possibility for signification, let alone for the polysemic hermeneutic practice that is at the heart of her psychoanalytic project.

As I understand her logic, Kristeva is making two analogous distinctions in her theorizing of the role of the paternal function. First, the *need to believe* is rooted in the signifying potentiality of this father of pre-history, this guarantor of symbolic meaning. Second, *the contents* of any belief structure, any orthodoxy, mark an attempt to contain the potentiality, the *jouissance* if you will, that ensues from this experience of ecstasy, whether religious, sexual, or creative. The paternal function understood in the Lacanian sense, as the law of language, is thus put into tension with the "individual father of pre-history," the one who provides a feeling of interiority and singularity, the one who generates creative signification. It is difficult, nonetheless, to hold onto the notion of an unmediated relationship that is paternal and not maternal, unless we remain aware of Kristeva's idea of the relationship of the semiotic and the symbolic as one of mutually enlivening symbiosis, in which the semiotic is given symbolic significance and containment and the symbolic is subject to the destabilizations of the semiotic. Her use of "relationship" is thus highly nuanced; the maternal is an undifferentiated matrix; access to the paternal is thus always the only possibility for relationship. The infant's access to this "father of individual pre-history" comes by way of an identification, if only fleeting, with the mother's love for the child's father and before that, with her own father.

As well, psychoanalysis, like religion, re-forges an "access to the sacred," but by way of the secular. This access is by way of the individual unconscious which, for Kristeva, becomes, in addition to a power of disruption or destabilization of the rational ego, a creative power of representation and signification. The individual, in the psychoanalytic act of interpreting the artifacts of his unconscious, is thereby introduced into a world of plural and restless signification, and also registers "the authority of inner experience." Indeed, the conviction that arises from an experience of the unconscious, whether it is by way of dreams or parapraxes, has its analogue in religious conviction. The difference, of course, is that the absolute has no role in psychoanalysis. The symbolic universe is not grounded in a canon of meanings and laws as it is in religious orthodoxies. Kristeva dramatically contrasts such orthodoxies partaking, as they do, of the "pure culture of the death drive," a culture of certainty and not of questioning, to the "ongoing rebirth" that inheres in the process of psychoanalysis.

As she has in previous works, notably *Tales of Love*, Kristeva draws on the writings of the Church Fathers, the mystics, and the humanists to foreground this need to believe as intimately connected to the possibility of knowing (and so alludes to the implication of desire and *jouissance* as well). There is an implicit symbolic exchange embedded in belief, the expectation that there will be something given in return, an etymological link to credit, even, in the original Sanskrit word, from which the Latin *credo* derives. (One thinks of the Medieval *Pearl*, in which

heaven is depicted as a place of infinite return, where the pearls line the streets, but do not diminish in value because of their number.) What the great religions restored to men (if not always to women), potentially stripped of their humanity, was a notion of singularity in the eyes of God, of culpability as well as redemption. Kristeva traces this Christian notion in its transformation by Renaissance Humanism into the idea of *genius*, and speculates on its possible transformations in our time as well. The problematics of genius are limned by Kristeva but are not explored in depth in this particular text. She allows that the sublimation of suffering both gives access to the sacred and provides transient "cures" for depression, while offering no real protection against the seductions of the death drive or against evil genius: as in the example of Céline, which she explores in *Powers of Horror*.

On the subject of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, Kristeva is less sanguine and more provocative. It is her contention that it is within the specific structures of Islamic religious thought, in the differences between Islamic monotheism and Judeo-Christian monotheism that the possibilities for the creative speaking subject run aground. In her analysis, Islam defines a juridical rather than a paternal bond between creator and creatures (67). The Judeo-Christian notions of original sin, the special relationship of divine election, as well as personal suffering, sacrifice, atonement, and love are what Kristeva finds specifically absent in Islam; thus, she speculates on the "improbability of an Islamic theo-logy" (68). That is, she doubts that there can be, at least at present, a creative, self-reflective speech emanating from Islam, a hermeneutics equivalent to Jewish or Christian hermeneutics. Consequently, Islamic fundamentalism, in Kristeva's analysis, seems to emerge inevitably from the structure of Islam itself, while she situates Christian and Jewish fundamentalism, by contrast, on the side of defensive actions in the face of threats to their existence.

Be that as it may, the fundamentalist stagnation of Islam raises a more general question about the very structure of *homo religiosus*. The latter can move beyond the *hatelove* that keeps him going only by taking a step to the side: by taking himself as object of thought. By developing his theology, by forcing it to confront the plural interpretations of his need to believe, the multiple variants of his needs to believe. Is this not what Freud did when he claimed it is possible to tell the love of the other, infinitely; to analyze oneself in analyzing it, infinitely? Might psychoanalysis be one of the variations of theology? Its ultimate variation, *hic et nunc*? (70)

Kristeva's claim is that the discourse of psychoanalysis, by returning the *agon* of guilt, parricide, atonement and compassion to the interior of the individual psyche and submitting it to speech, a speech emanating from the wellspring of the individual unconscious, can forge a variation on traditional religion and its appeal to fundamentalism and death. This is, arguably, a utopian project, especially when we consider the forces within psychoanalysis itself which move toward fundamentalism, what Jean Laplanche has described as a tendency toward narcissistic closure, repressing again both the notion of the unconscious drives and their sublimatory, creative potential. In any case, Kristeva sees this utopian project as our only choice at this juncture in our history, describing her own relationship with the practice of psychoanalysis as "one of the *adventures of immanence*" and an experience of "*infinite intellectual love*." She challenges us with the possibility of ongoing and infinite creation, of activity and plenitude in the place of homeostasis and stagnation. Her syncretic vision of psychoanalysis and theology seems a continuation into secular life of the project of the Reformation, the demand on the individual to

carry both the burdens and the possibilities of freedom without succumbing either to tyranny or to existential despair.