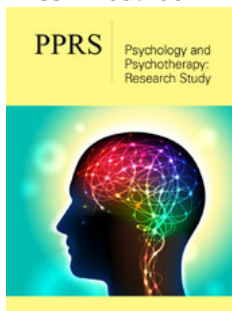


Julia Kristeva's Psychoanalytic View of Islam

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ISSN: 2639-0612



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Submission: 📅 December 09, 2022

Published: 📅 January 09, 2023

Volume 6 - Issue 2

How to cite this article: Johannes Twardella. Julia Kristeva's Psychoanalytic View of Islam. *Psychol Psychother Res Stud.* 6(2). PPRS. 000634. 2023.
DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2023.06.000634](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2023.06.000634)

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Introduction

The French literary scholar and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva was asked how she views the possibility of a peaceful coexistence of the three monotheistic religions¹. In her answer, she remarkably addresses, among other things, Islam. Due to the given question, her explanations do not claim to provide a comprehensive psychoanalytical interpretation of this religion. In addition, her answer is shaped by the fact that in recent years and decades a certain variant of Islam - not least in France - has become the focus of attention: Islamic fundamentalism. It can be said of this that it rather stands in the way of a peaceful coexistence of the three monotheistic religions, indeed tends to make it impossible. For fundamentalism emphasizes the differences. (From Kristeva's perspective, it is to be understood as a «defensive hardening of identity» (83).) For peaceful coexistence, however, it would be important not (only) to emphasize differences, but also to recognize and name commonalities. Islamic fundamentalism, however, seems to be so dominant at present from Kristeva's point of view that it is not conceivable for her that commonalities are articulated from a religious, or more precisely, an Islamic point of view. That is why she relies on science, more precisely on those «anthropologists, sociologists, psychoanalysts» who «read religion as an analyzable given» (83). She expects them to highlight commonalities so that it becomes clear that peaceful coexistence is quite possible.

Kristeva represents an understanding of religion in which a distinction is made between two levels². One level can be called anthropological. On this level Kristeva speaks of a need that every human being has and that is universal in this respect, the «need to believe». From this can be distinguished a second level, on which particular responses are given that satisfy the need to believe. While the need to believe is universal and invariant, on the second level particular answers are given, which are very different and subject to constant changes. And this also means: In order to satisfy the need to believe, one can refer to those answers which are traditionally given by the religions, but under the conditions of secularization, i.e. the decline of the persuasive power of the religions, new answers can also be given which have hardly anything in common with the known religions (except that they also satisfy the need to believe). However, Kristeva does not address this question of what these answers (can) look like.

It should be noted that Kristeva does not speak of «answers» (which would presuppose a question), but of an «experience.» Using the term «answers» would place the emphasis on the intellectual dimension. Kristeva, on the other hand, prefers the term «experience» because it also addresses an emotional dimension. While the need is one of «believing,» there are always feelings associated with the intellectual response - and it is these that are important to Kristeva. In the past, religions have been able to satisfy the need to believe by not simply providing «answers» but also by opening up a space of experience in which different

¹Kristeva J (2014) This incredible need to believe pouring. Germany.

²Kristeva's reflections on what she calls «abject,» which are also important for her understanding of religion, will not be discussed below. In: Suchsland I (1992) Julia Kristeva for the introduction, Hamburg, Germany.

feelings - Kristeva speaks of an «alchemy of feelings» - could unfold. However, due to the process of secularization, Kristeva questions how rich experiences are still possible when religions have lost their importance and instead a «calculating consciousness» (7) is rampant. In light of this, Kristeva argues for a new humanism that keeps open spaces of experience, which, according to Kristeva, are a necessary condition for human creativity. What is the basis of the need to believe? Kristeva first answers this question with the help of etymology. Based on this, faith is to be understood as an imagined reciprocity: The believer sees himself in a relationship with an - imagined - transcendent instance endowed with power, in whose favor he sees himself. His religiosity can be understood as a repayment of this favor. Such a reciprocal relationship is - ontogenetically seen - experienced for the first time when the dyadic relationship between mother and child opens up to a triad, to a third. This third is in most cases the father but can also be another person. The only important thing is that this person perceives the child as divorced from the mother, as a unique individual. Thus, an experience of mutual recognition can occur between the child and the third, an at least imagined recognition with an imagined third, into which fear can also be mixed and which not infrequently articulates itself in a childish babbling, yes, ultimately in speech, and indeed in an attitude of «>believing expectation<» (Freud).

«An imaginary father who, mediated through the mother, acknowledges and loves me and signifies to me that I am not her but an Other, who makes me believe that I can >believe<» (11)

The reciprocal recognition, indeed, identification with the father made possible by the mother's love, conditions a belief. And this, according to Kristeva, is the precondition for speaking. Moreover, it is also the basis for a desire for knowledge. Because with the possibility to communicate, questions break open, questions that relate above all to one's own identity, but also to many other things. What is the meaning of psychoanalysis according to Kristeva? It is, she answers, a place, a practice, in the framework of which those experiences can be made, which are hardly possible in advanced modernity in view of the secularization process and the «calculating consciousness» which has become dominant. The prerequisite for this is that the psychoanalyst meets what the patient says with a quasi-religious attitude, is «given credence». Then a space opens up for a wealth of experiences, or more precisely, for speaking about all possible experiences. The «alchemy of feelings», which has its ontogenetic root in triangulation, and which found expression in the framework of religion, especially also of religious art - e.g., in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach - finds a space in the practice of psychoanalysis under the conditions of secularization. According

to Kristeva, it - as well as various human sciences - can therefore be the voice of a new, contemporary humanism.

For the understanding of Islam or the answer to the question of the possibility of peaceful coexistence, Kristeva considers «the relationship which the divine maintains to the father function, within Islam» (79) to be central. Kristeva thus ties in with the psychoanalytic explanation of religion as outlined by Freud in his writing «Die Zukunft einer Illusion»³ «(The Future of an Illusion): In the monotheistic religions, functions are attributed to the divine instance that the father fulfills towards his child. Freud mentions above all the function of offering protection. After the child has detached itself from its parents, is on the way to becoming an adult and no longer wants to take advantage of the paternal protection from its former father, it seeks protection from an imagined instance to which it ascribes a power exceeding human capability, in monotheistic religions an omnipotence. Against the background of Freud's argumentation in «Totem und Tabu»⁴ (Totem and Taboo) as well as in «Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion»⁵ (Moses and Monotheism) it could be added that not only the longing for the father, but according to Freud also a feeling of guilt leads to the belief in a divine instance, the feeling of guilt to have detached oneself from the father, to have overcome him, even to have «murdered» him.

Kristeva agrees with Freud's view, who in «Der Mann Moses» formulates the assumption that in Islam there could not have been a «deepening» of faith, because in the context of its «foundation» no murder took place and consequently there was no occasion for a feeling of guilt. Kristeva now presents her reflections as a complement to those of Freud. They can be systematized by relating them to the question of what Freud might have meant by «deepening.» Kristeva's answer is (pointedly formulated): «deepening» refers to the feelings associated with man's relationship to the thought-constructed divine entity. This relationship is not thought in Islam in analogy to that between father and child - e.g., in Sura 112 it is explicitly negated that Allah may be imagined as father - and it is also not «oedipalized», i.e., that spectrum of feelings, of contradictory feelings, which can go from intimate love to hatred to blood, are not provided for here.

«The movement of deepening the love-hate relationship before and for the father (...) remains alien to Islam.» (80)

The quotation calls for a clarification: ambivalent feelings can be connected to the relationship between God and humans in Islam as well, but they are not «deepened,» not taken as far as they are in the other monotheistic religions. (Kristeva refers primarily to

³Freud S (1927) The future of an illusion. In: Ders (1974) Society Issues. Origins of Religion, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, pp. 135-189.

⁴Freud S (1912) Totem and taboo, some correspondences in the mental life of the savage and the neurotic. In: Ders (1974), Society Issues, Origins of Religion, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, pp. 287-444.

⁵Freud S (1939) The man Moses and the monotheistic religion. In: Ders (1974), Society Issues. Origins of Religion, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, pp. 455-581.

Christianity.) Instead, Kristeva asserts, the relationship is more akin to «a bond as in a legal agreement» (81). Kristeva illustrates her reasoning using the figure of Abraham. In her view, she is a «key figure» (79). In the story in which Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son - which he was obediently willing to do but was ultimately spared - a «deepening» is «avoided» in several ways, Kristeva argues (80), for example, in that the Qur'an states that Abraham «dreamed» the command to sacrifice his son. In view of this, the question arises whether this is meant to refer to the fact that Abraham wished for the death of his son, or whether in this way the event is meant to be «mitigated», insofar as it was «only a dream». Moreover, it is unclear which son it is about at all, Isaac or Ismael. Kristeva leaves it at these few hints, but - in order to strengthen her argument - could also have gone into the fact that in the Qur'an Abraham's doubts as to whether he should follow the command and the ambivalence of feelings that could have unfolded in the face of these doubts are countered by the son, who calls upon his father to obediently do what God has commanded him to do⁶. While in the case of doubts a space for the development of ambivalent feelings could have opened up, this space is closed by the reference to the duty of obedience.

It should be emphasized once again that Kristeva deals only marginally with Islam - the focus of her explanations is on the two other monotheistic religions, yes, ultimately above all on Christianity. A «deepening» of the ambivalent feelings has taken place in these, for which, with regard to Judaism, especially the «election» of the people of Israel stands, in Christianity the «love», which is expressed above all in the death of Jesus on the cross. That it is necessary to differentiate at this point is at least hinted at by Kristeva by briefly discussing Sufism, which, as is well known, opened up a broad space for the development of feelings, including ambivalent feelings⁷. Freud expressed the suspicion that the lack of «deepening» might have been the reason why the dynamics of social development, which had been triggered by the foundation of religion (which he interpreted as a «recovery of the father»), had finally come to a standstill. Once leaving aside the question of whether it is possible to speak of a standstill at all, both the question of how the dynamics of social development in the early period of Islam can be explained and the question of the reasons for the eventual slackening of these dynamics remain ultimately open. Kristeva does not provide an answer to these questions in her remarks either.

⁶Jiko J (2004) The denial of ambivalence. monotheism in Islam. *Psyche. Journal of Psychoanalysis and its Applications* 58: 26-46.

⁷Kermani N (2005) *The terror of god-attar, Job and the metaphysical revolt*, Munich, Germany.