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OF INCREDIBILITY IN THE
NEED TO BELIEVE:
A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION

Proof—Never interested me, I believe. But I also believe that one should never renounce proof: ever more reason and light in order to preserve the improbable in its redoubts, those of the other. I only like faith or, rather, the irreligious proof involved in faith.

—Jacques Derrida, “Épreuves d’écriture”¹

Ignorance is ignorance; no right to believe anything can be derived from it.

—Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

In recent years, Julia Kristeva has been developing the contention that we harbor what she calls an “incredible need to believe.” This contention derives primarily from her practice as a psychoanalyst. The phrase appears with “incredible” added to the title of the 2007 French version of a book first published in Rome in 2006 under the more straightforward *Bisogno di credere*.² The adjective remains in the English and other translations. *Cet incroyable besoin de croire* (or *This Incredible Need to Believe*) presents an extensive interview—from which the qualifier “*incroyable*” derives—followed by a shorter one, a lecture, and various other texts, all given in unabashedly Catholic contexts.³

This Incredible Need to Believe is far from a fluke in Kristeva’s recent career. Over the course of the two decades prior to its publication she had, with increasing persistence, demonstrated her interest in this particular dimension of belief. The subtitle of *In the Beginning Was Love*, first appearing in 1985, is *Psychoanalysis and Faith*.⁴ Her *New Maladies of the Soul* appeared in 1993 and

The Feminine and the Sacred, authored in tandem with Catherine Clément, in 1998.⁵ The subtitle (dropped for the English translation) of the original French version of her 2005 essay, *Hatred and Forgiveness is Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis III*.⁶ Finally, in the year following *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Kristeva's magisterial "imagined life of the Saint of Avila," *Teresa, My Love* was published.⁷

The dust cover and title page of the original Italian issue of the book under examination here emphasizes that this is *Un punto di vista laico*⁸ and, coming from an avowed atheist, the exuberance with which "incredible" is applied to "the need to believe" begs for exploration—especially in light of Sigmund Freud's unambiguous and relentless efforts to encourage our species to overcome its dependence on religion. Ironically, Kristeva's contention that religion—especially Roman Catholicism—and psychoanalysis have much to share and can join forces in the common cause of civilization rests upon the firm ground of Freud's theory of the superego.

It is quite true that in many of his essays Sigmund Freud acknowledges that the kind of belief in which Kristeva is interested constitutes an irrepressible impulse in our species. Notably, in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), the figure Kristeva recognizes as "the least religious man of his century"⁹ asserted that: "Man's self-regard, seriously menaced, calls for consolation; life and the universe must be robbed of their terrors; moreover his curiosity, moved, it is true, by the strongest practical interest, demands an answer";¹⁰ thus, a bit further, "the dream-work knows how to select a condition that will turn even that dreaded event [death] into a wish-fulfillment."¹¹ In that self-same work, however, ultimately judging faith to be not only an illusion but indeed a serious *delusion*, Freud toiled mightily to provide a framework—however "Victorian"—wherein we might evolve out of and beyond religion.

Of course, for philosophical speculation, something akin to belief is fundamental and, thus, necessary. Belief is akin to what Martin Heidegger called "the undisclosed" and is not unrelated to the hypothesis that forms the kernel of demonstration and proof. Kristeva, of course, recognizes this when she observes: "Whether I belong to a religion, whether I be agnostic or atheist, when I say 'I believe,' I mean 'I hold as true.'"¹² She illustrates the point with quotes from Voltaire, Pascal, and Montaigne, who famously affirmed that "it is perhaps not without reason that we consider credulity and the readiness to be persuaded to be signs of simplicity and ignorance."¹³ Yet the incredibility stressed in the title and throughout the volume casts an air of mystery over belief. Perhaps more inscrutable still is that the variety of belief Kristeva has been working on is a *need* rather than, say, a wish or an impulse or a drive. There is a need, in any case, to meet the challenge that Kristeva holds before us of determining just how incredibility contributes to the need (if indeed it is a need) to believe.

As Freud knew, "the principle task of civilization, its actual *raison d'être*, is to defend us against nature."¹⁴ But is the best method for accomplishing this that "civilization" has to offer *religious* belief? That there remain billions of individuals in our advanced primate species who cling to a need to believe

(i.e. have faith) predicated on incredible propositions is a fact that obviously calls for tolerance from those of us who have moved beyond such superstitious behavior. But should we not persevere—along lines clearly set out by Freud, for example—to develop rational, critical, ethical, and scientific means of explaining and coming to terms with nature?

To attempt some further directions of thought on these matters, I should now like to explore—in as philosophical a manner possible—the dimension of incredibility in the need to believe. I shall do so principally through a juxtaposition of Kristeva's eponymous interview and Sigmund Freud's 1927 essay, *The Future of an Illusion*.

I

Although we know already that the belief of which Kristeva writes and speaks is a particular type of belief—faith, as it were—that psychoanalysis and religion share, it will be useful for our exploration to review broad and abstract definitions of the vast subject that is belief, of its initial inflection by need and, finally, by the quality of incredibility attached to both.

Belief is a state of mind in which a person holds something to be the case in the absence of any fact that might prove with certainty that it *is* the case. Belief differs from knowledge in that the conviction arrived at to form the latter is based in empirical evidence, fact, and proof. In the absence of these bases, we can merely be content with speculation, fantasy, or unfounded likelihood. Whereas knowledge is achieved when a proposition is proven, belief treats a proposition *as if* one knew.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant situated belief vis-à-vis two other forms of conviction—opinion and knowledge—as functions of subjective and objective sufficiency. Regarding belief, these are criteria by which philosophy continues to operate today:

Taking something to be true, or the subjective validity of judgment, has the following three stages in relation to conviction . . . *having an opinion*, *believing*, and *knowing*. *Having an opinion* is taking something to be true with the consciousness that it is subjectively *as well as* objectively insufficient. If taking something to be true is only subjectively sufficient and is at the same time held to be objectively insufficient, then it is called *believing*. Finally, when taking something to be true is both subjectively and objectively sufficient it is called *knowing*. Subjective sufficiency is called *conviction* (for myself), objective sufficiency, *certainty* (for everyone). I will not pause for the exposition of such readily grasped concepts.¹⁵

As psychoanalysts whose practice entails critique of and commentary on collective behavior, both Freud and Kristeva are necessarily interested in prereligious beliefs and religious beliefs. Notwithstanding their differences, prereligious beliefs and religious beliefs alike abide by Kant's criteria: the conviction of their adherents equals their uncertainty.

A need is something that, again, by current universally accepted definition, is required for an organism's survival. Certainly all members of our species who are in a state of good mental health yearn, want, desire, strive toward goals, and so forth. But only if it is alone present to consciousness—that is, in the absence of and unchallenged by alternate, more plausible narratives for human wonderment and fear—can belief by a stretch be deemed a need.

It is in the context of these definitions that “incredible” comes provocatively to modify our putatively entrenched need to believe. The etymological root of this adjective is the same as the Latin for “believable”: *credibilis*. That which is incredible is therefore unbelievable: not even susceptible, that is, to satisfying simple subjective criteria for sufficiency let alone objective ones. Here is how one scholar has brilliantly paraphrased Francis Bacon's crucial contention in his *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum Libri IX* as to why, despite the “reluctance in our reason,” we are compelled to “believe God's word”: “whereas the incredibility of witnesses decreases the credibility of their testimonies, in the case of God it is precisely the incredibility of His word that increases His credibility as Author.”¹⁶ Clearly, incredibility in religious belief keeps it in a realm impervious to and oblivious of fact.

Freud recognized this. With unequivocal directness, he wrote that “all religious doctrines are illusions and unsusceptible of proof.” Freud's proclamation is predicated on the fact that “we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification”; and even before that, in defining illusion, “that the Messiah will come and found a golden age is much less likely” than a girl's “illusion that a prince will come and marry her.”¹⁷

There is, of course, a variety of illusion to which Freud adhered: the contingent illusions attendant on the scientific method. But unlike the arrogant immutability of “truths” based on faith, the belief of a scientist is eminently modifiable. Here is Freud clearly delighted with this suppleness and integrity: “we make trial with hypotheses that soon have to be rejected as inadequate.”¹⁸ In fact, the modifiability of hypotheses has been one of the essential elements of the scientific method since Aristotle—perhaps since Democritus. It is in this area that we can further lend definition to credibility (and to its opposite, incredibility). Credibility is the set of objective and subjective components contributing to the magnitude of our ability to believe that something or someone exists or existed or, a fortiori, to believe a given narrative.

The merit to scientific “belief,” then, is the willingness of such “believers” to jettison them as soon as the establishment of their objective sufficiency proves impossible for want of empirical evidence. Religious belief, on the other hand, digs in, taking subjective sufficiency for objective sufficiency. “To assess the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie within the scope of the present inquiry,” wrote Freud in 1927, “it is enough for us that we have recognized them as being, in their psychological nature, illusions.”¹⁹ Or, with a hint of sarcasm at religion's ability to arrest man's development: “it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent

Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be. And it would be more remarkable still if our wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors had succeeded in solving all these difficult riddles of the universe.”²⁰

II

Already, on the very first page of her letter to Frédéric Boyer that serves “in guise of a preface,” Kristeva is describing the “need to believe” as “that narcotic that makes living easier”²¹—in terms that surprisingly echo Marx’s famously misunderstood remark that “religion . . . is the opium of the people.”²² Nevertheless, when she asserts that the need to believe “is the foundation of our capacity to be . . . *speaking beings*,”²³ we sense, rightly, that the belief of which she will be speaking is neither entirely religious nor exclusively so. And this belief that takes hold in the not-yet-speaking baby is neither the “belief that” or the “belief in” between which philosophers usually distinguish when discussing this particular state of mind. Although, as we shall see, infantile belief, which Kristeva claims enables our transition from *phonē* to *logos*, is, to her view, already a foundation for faith in gods and, particularly, the lone gods in the image of human fathers.

Kristeva announces the goal she has in mind in exploring the incredible need to believe on the last page of this letter-introduction. That goal is “to touch upon a few big questions that vitally concern me, starting with this prepolitical and prereligious need to believe, which constitutes . . . only one of the elements in this complex experience of faith.”²⁴ Although an avowed secularist, Kristeva’s wager is that religious belief and its institutions have as much to contribute to reforming an imperfect humanist tradition hopelessly adrift today as psychoanalysis does. This wager, as we shall see, is grounded in the role of the father figure common to psychoanalytic theory and church dogma.

Indeed, the last words of this long interview that forms the core of *This Incredible Need to Believe* reiterate Kristeva’s aspirations well. Seeing a “programming of the superfluity of human life” as the most likely trend of the immediate future, she “calls not for a return to but a refoundation of the authority of the Greco-Judeo-Christianity that gave the world the desire for a ‘common world,’ constituted by a plurality of ‘who’s’ that Arendt points to as ‘the center of politics.’”²⁵ “It is up to us,” she adds, “to reinterpret this gift. Only a ‘new politics’ thus enlightened can still save us.”²⁶ The inextricable ties binding the psychoanalysis that Kristeva practices to the religion that Sigmund Freud strove to supersede are thus patent. Proof that social sciences may yet fail to shake loose from their primitive origins in belief systems may be found in the question with which Carmine Donzelli initiates the long interview. When the director of Donzelli Editore states that he would like “to begin, not with specifically religious arguments, but with considerations that are more in the domain of anthropology or psychoanalysis,” he begs the question by naming modern

disciplines that, despite origins in Enlightenment Europe, are themselves—of necessity—descendants of (and improvements vis-à-vis) religion.²⁷ Kristeva seems to admit this to a certain extent in a rhetorical question she pronounces toward the end of the conversation with Donzelli: “Might psychoanalysis be one of the variations of theology? Its ultimate variation, *hic et nunc*?”²⁸

III

Freud clearly used psychoanalytic theory and practice not only better to understand the need to believe as an experience of consciousness but also in order to prepare humankind for overcoming faith. He forcefully implied as much near the conclusion of *The Future of an Illusion*: “surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. . . . the sole purpose of my book is to point out the necessity for this forward step.”²⁹ In no way did he advocate either legislating or cajoling the need away: “Since men are so little accessible to reasonable arguments and are so entirely governed by their instinctual wishes, why should one set out to deprive them of an instinctual satisfaction and replace it by reasonable arguments?” However, he saw as his task and, indeed, his duty as an intellectual to educate others out of such darkness: “It is true that men are like this; but have you asked yourself whether they *must* be like this, whether their innermost nature necessitates it?”³⁰

This is a conjecture with which Kristeva also grapples. It is also part of what she means by “incredible,” as when we find it incredible when a teenager still believes in Santa Claus. Indeed, Freud, like Marx before him, recognized a certain marvel in the fact of religion’s having taken part in the unfolding of the human story.³¹ In Kristeva’s thought, however, the marvel at and the virtual superiority attributed to religion emblemized by having lent it the marker of “incredible” are undeniable. In declarations like “the questioning of any and all entities, including belief and its objects, is one of Christianity’s most impressive legacies; and humanism, its rebellious child, must not be prevented from developing this legacy,” we see these dimensions and qualities of incredibility at work.³²

Kristeva stresses that through her exchanges with religious leaders, she is working at a “pressing need to radically reform humanism.”³³ The urgency with which she persists at joining forces with believers is predicated on real present-day problems both plaguing and caused by humans—one of which operates on the fringes of religion: “Not hostile to religions, and even less indulgent with them, this school of thought that I am part of is perhaps our last chance to deal with the rise of obscurantism and its other face: the management via technology of the human species.”³⁴

The roots of such dysfunction and self-dehumanization are in our origins as individual subjects just as they are in our origins as a certain evolved primate species: “Because I believe, I speak,” says Kristeva, “I would not speak if I didn’t believe; believing in what I say, and persisting in saying it, comes from the capacity to believe in the Other and not at all from existential experience,

necessarily disappointing.” Then, in a moment reminiscent of her early studies in the realm of linguistics and borrowing from Benveniste, she goes on to trace the origins of Latin *credo* in “Sanskrit *sraddha* ‘which denotes an act of ‘confidence’ in a god.”³⁵ Later, she will use the word *créance* or *credit*.³⁶

It is thus the link established in Judeo-Christian narratives between belief and the origin of speech, on the one hand, and the link between, again, belief and a child’s first use of spoken language, on the other, that for Kristeva form the tie binding psychoanalysis to religion. Kristeva’s ideas concerning the need to believe are intrinsically bound to the nascent human—the infant on the cusp of the discursive realm (*logos*). Belief embodies the key skill allowing us to cross that threshold. “‘I’ am only if a beloved authority acknowledges me.”³⁷ The question inevitably arises as to whether that moment in our individual development need refer back to the structure of religious belief and, even more importantly, be promoted to the status of metaphor for the evolution of the species. “Is it,” in other words, “inevitable that this ‘need to believe’ be religious?”³⁸ For, if it is, then the “beloved authority” takes on an identity of incredibly powerful proportions with repercussions in the social and political realms that could be crucial to the survival of this species and of the other species whose lives we have made dependent on ours.

Kristeva makes no secret as to the identity of this authority: “The psychoanalytical experience of the child and the adult . . . testifies to a crucial moment of development, when the *infans* projects itself onto a third person with which it identifies: the loving father. . . . [T]his confident recognition granted me by the father loving the mother and loved by her, and that I in turn grant him, turns my babble into linguistic signs whose value he establishes.”³⁹ Or, in language both poetic and emphatically favorable to the perpetuation of the nuclear heterosexual family: “At the dawn of individuation a life raft . . . appears on the horizon of the ‘oceanic feeling’: the loving father. An imaginary Surface who, through his loving authority, takes me from the engulfing container: he is the guarantor of my being.”⁴⁰

Kristeva may well attempt to reassure us that she is “only interested in the *psychic reality* that these events generate in believer subjects, in the representations or the phantasms, leaving aside the question whether these events really happened or not,”⁴¹ yet enthroning and confirming the paternal instance in the eternal status of quintessential “loving authority” runs the risk of leading the believers (that we all supposedly still are despite ourselves) to a fairly masochistic psychosis: “‘We are both of us in love and, guilty, we ought to be beaten to death together, death initiates our reunion in the beyond’: such might be the believer’s motto.”⁴² The believer, in that case, would appear to be in far greater need of help than the “rebellious humanist child.”

Freud unflinchingly recognizes this danger, I think, once again in *The Future of an Illusion* when he writes that “religion would . . . be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father,” adding that it can lead to “amentia, in a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion.”⁴³ Yet, in plumbing “the depths of the unconscious, [Freud] made of the ‘need to believe’

an *object of knowledge*.”⁴⁴ Despite his antitheism, it is perhaps a fatal flaw of his legacy—and one leaving the door open for continued collaboration between psychoanalysis and religion—that, as Kristeva states, “it is truly this capacity to signify, this *significance rooted in the destiny of the paternal function*, that Freudian psychoanalysis bequeaths us”;⁴⁵ that he “did not hesitate to postulate, in commenting upon the destiny of the paternity that governs the installation of significance and its accidents, ‘a high aim in human beings’: *Das höhere Wesen in Menschen*”;⁴⁶ and that he enabled his descendants to declare that “the speaking being is a believing being.”⁴⁷ This leads Kristeva to assert, in face of the final words of the 1927 essay—i.e. that “my illusions are not, like religious ones, incapable of correction. They have not the character of delusion”⁴⁸—that it is a “superficial reading of *The Future of an Illusion* (1927)” that “allows us to think that Freud reduced belief to an illusion.”⁴⁹

IV

And so, for better or worse (between which one day we will have to decide), psychoanalysis has inherited from the first and second revealed monotheisms a conviction that we operate in a relation of incontrovertible fealty to our father, a father, the father, the Father:

Christian Faith rests upon an indelible confidence in the existence of an Ideal Father, and upon absolute love for this loving Father, who is seen, quite simply, as the foundation of the speaking subject, who is, consequently, none other than the subject of loving speech. The Father of Agape or Amor, therefore, not Eros, although these two kinds of love come together, when they are not opposed, in Christian histories. “I love because I am loved, therefore I am,” could be the believer’s syllogism. . . . This syllogism takes us back to the “loving father of individual prehistory,” whom we encountered with Freud at the start of our discussion.⁵⁰

Or, as the “father of psychoanalysis” put it, “now that God was a single person, man’s relations to him could recover the intimacy and intensity of the child’s relation to his father.”⁵¹ Part and parcel of this development brought about by our first attempts—with Judaism, then Christianity—to explain the universe, to palliate our fears about death should have been the recognition that first attempts are always the most imperfect and, thus, destined for replacement by better, more convincing, more mature work of the mind: “when man personifies the forces of nature he is again following an infantile model.”⁵²

As we intimated before, in regard to the disturbing story of our socialized being’s inextricability from patriarchal forces, we find Freud in 1927 struggling mightily with inherent contradictions. To refute the arguments in favor of religious belief, paternal authority must be repudiated: “We ought to believe [my opponents maintain] because our forefathers believed. But these ancestors of ours were far more ignorant than we are. They believed in things we could

not possibly accept today; and the possibility occurs to us that the doctrines of religion may belong to that class too."⁵³ Albeit the fatherly foundation for speech, for the superego, indeed for civilization itself, "we arrive at the singular conclusion that of all the information provided by our cultural assets it is precisely the elements which might be of the greatest importance to us and which have the task of solving the riddles of the universe and of reconciling us to the sufferings of life . . . that are the least well authenticated."⁵⁴ Recognizing and paying tribute to the great works made under the aegis of belief systems, it is high time, stresses Freud, that humans get on with their spiritual evolution, as this thought movement's crescendo indicates: "religious doctrine. . . [has] called up the spirits of the greatest men and of the most eminent thinkers, but all the pronouncements and information which they have received from them have been so foolish and so wretchedly meaningless that one can find nothing credible in them but the capacity of the spirits to adapt themselves to the circle of people who have conjured them up."⁵⁵

V

In studying Kristeva's thinking in regard to belief, the question may arise as to whether Freud's attempts to wrest dominion over belief from religion and bequeath it to secular humanism were effective enough. Certainly, as Kristeva infers, "what Freud had in mind when he said that it wasn't so much a question of 'founding a religion'" was that it was more about "'sublimating' the need to believe."⁵⁶ But is sublimation sufficient when, like the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the very operation carries over all the primitive and sometimes embarrassingly erroneous aspects of that which is sublimated? "It would be an undoubted advantage if we were to leave God out altogether," Freud wrote in 1927, "and honestly admit the purely human origin of all the regulations and precepts of civilization."⁵⁷ But is condescension—however amusing—enough to rid us once and for all of the illusions inherent to religion? Freud's was a commendable endeavor and one that gestured toward the eventual (and long overdue) release of humans from their cultural infancy. Yes, "our science is no illusion [and] an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere,"⁵⁸ but when atheist humanism concedes to religion "customs" and behaviors long ago proven to have nothing to do with "human nature," it gives established religion an undeserved pass for all the ills it has caused and continues to cause despite the great works of art that have been made under its shadow. Of course magnificent sighs have been heard from the heart and soul of the *condition that requires illusions* (Marx), but it would be truly incredible indeed to expect rational discussion from peddlers in miracles and magic, from those who are keeping vast swathes of humanity lulled by the absurd, empty, and cruel promises of religion.⁵⁹

We need to be clear, nevertheless, that under that banner of incredibility Kristeva concedes nothing to revealed religion: the need to believe is incredible because, as she puts it, "it is not a question of making of it an absolute, flattering

it and using it as a basis for this or that order or hierarchy.”⁶⁰ She maintains, however, in accordance with the tenets of Freudism, that we become human (i.e. speaking subjects and civilized members of society) only by means of the introjection of a paternal instance—the internalization of a “loving father”—and that Judaism and Christianity got that story right. “The pivotal figure of this fatherhood,” she writes, “both juridical and loving, is none other than the biblical Abraham, who spares Isaac: for God is so moved by his obedience to the divine commandment.”⁶¹ The same convoluted logic by which these fathers—in this case, one is earthly, the other celestial—are construed as loving fathers is repeated in the Christ legend in which, according to John, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.”⁶² By “gave” is of course meant “allowed to be murdered.” “No other religion,” as Kristeva eloquently puts it, “even that of the Greek gods, encouraged the experience of sublimation quite so effectively as the Son-Father beaten to death.”⁶³

This is why some of the most powerful statements Freud made (for example, “ignorance is ignorance; no right to believe anything can be derived from it,” and “where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every possible sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanor”) ultimately ring a bit hollow.⁶⁴ The “ambivalence in the attitude toward the father [that is] deeply imprinted in every religion” is an ambivalence that Freud found impossible to conjure;⁶⁵ hence his incapacity to square a vehement and altogether cogent rejection of religious belief (“Let us. . . ask on what their claim to be believed is founded”)⁶⁶ with his views about our acquisition of *logos* and the formation of the superego. Indeed, when we read this formulation found in *The Ego and the Id*—“The superior being, which turned into the ego ideal, once threatened castration, and this dread of castration is probably the nucleus round which the subsequent fear of conscience has gathered”⁶⁷—we can but be reminded of Abraham’s Ur-threat, of Isaac’s Ur-dread, and of some of the less savory handiwork carried out in the name of Christian belief.

Unlike earthly fathers, the celestial “One” is believed (and feared) to be all seeing, all knowing, able to supervise every action, every thought while the subject is awake or while he or she is sleeping, overseeing everything even before one is born and even—since an integral part of faith is the belief in an afterlife—after one is dead. This tableau epitomizes not only totalitarian but also eternal supervision. It might, as we have already hinted, be the root of masochism: the wish, that is, to be a slave. Meanwhile, the living vicars of this system are the “fathers of the Church” who disseminate their love in ways that are all too familiar to us.

VI

In the place of democracy with its inherent freedoms, the result of religion’s intrusive claims in the realm of politics may degenerate into theocratic authority: sharia imposed in Muslim states—Shiite and Sunni alike (Iran, Saudi Arabia)—the seemingly relentless reduction of the deist-conceived U.S. to a monolingual

evangelical Christian state, and the inextricable contradictions of the Jewish state of Israel. As Freud stressed, there is a “fatal resemblance between the religious ideas which we revere and the mental products of primitive peoples and times.”⁶⁸ When they are applied to political management, the principles derived from faith tend with virtual inevitability to tyrannize either the unfaithful or those whose faith is “misguided” into another religion.

While “incredibility” might fairly evoke the persistence or even the growth of religious belief, there are some indications that the number of agnostics, atheists, and antitheists is increasing, despite the fact that apostasy is still punishable by death in many parts of *man’s* world. But even if these indications prove factual, belief applied to politics still works its nefarious ways. Slavoj Žižek recently observed that: “When [Sam] Harris writes, ‘It is possible, for instance, to be a practicing Jew who does *not* believe in God,’ he fails to mention how the non-believer can nonetheless draw all practical consequences from this belief—for example, you might not believe in God yet nonetheless believe that God gave your people the land they claim as theirs.” Žižek then proceeds to recount an example of just such a claim pronounced by Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely, to which he adds that “if such a direct legitimization of one’s claim to land by reference to God’s will is not religious fundamentalism, then one should wonder if this term has any meaning at all,” remarking for good measure that “the irony reaches its peak when we bear in mind that, according to some surveys, Israel is the most atheist state in the world (more than 60 per cent of Jews in Israel don’t believe in God).”⁶⁹

In advocating for the importance—through psychoanalytic theory and practice—of the need to believe, Kristeva toils admirably at building a rampart against “religions’ past and present fundamentalist off-course drift.”⁷⁰ She places what she sees as “the dead ends of secularized societies” on equal footing with this “drift” as a threat to the horizon of a more peaceful and just world.⁷¹ One leads, of course, to the murderous violence with which we are all too familiar, the other to “the automation of the species.”⁷² Asserting that there is a “consensus that our multicultural and recomposed societies” are “deprived of moral bases,”⁷³ Kristeva claims that “the alternative to the rise of religiosity, as to its opposite, narrow-minded nihilism, comes already from precisely those *thought loci* that we are attempting not to occupy but to bring to life.”⁷⁴ Those “thought loci” are situated in “the vast continent of the social sciences.”⁷⁵ Between these two impediments to survival, Kristeva is determined to create “optimal condition[s] for democratic debate.”⁷⁶ The burden of guilt for not allowing this debate to occur is squarely on the shoulders of those who have agreed with Freud that “civilization runs a greater risk if we maintain our present attitude to religion than if we give it up”⁷⁷ and have chosen to ignore the persistence of religious belief: “Is it not surprising that our secularized societies have neglected this incredible need to believe?”⁷⁸

Freud optimistically maintained that “there is no stopping [the scientific spirit]; the greater the number of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling away from religious belief.”⁷⁹ This is because Freud firmly believed in the species’ capacity for self-

amelioration: “It is not true that the human mind has undergone no development since the earliest times and that, in contrast to the advances of science and technology, it is the same today as it was at the beginning of history.”⁸⁰ In this respect, Freud was a staunch and prominent proponent of a variety of belief that stands vigil for its own revision: the conviction not only that evolution of living beings is a fact, but that the evolution of our greatest attribute—consciousness—is possible within the life of *this* species.

VII

Here is how Kristeva sums up the fatal tension between belief’s perversion as fundamentalism and humanism’s perversion as “narrow-minded nihilism”: “The problem of this beginning of the third millennium is not the war of religions but the rift and void that now separates those *who want to know that God is unconscious* and those who would rather not know this, the better *to enjoy the show that proclaims He exists*.”⁸¹ In her psychoanalytic practice, therefore, Kristeva has taken on the laudable task of attempting to draw young subjects back from destructive practices like anorexia and jihadism. In her role as a prominent public intellectual, she has brought a variety of religious and secular (clinical) players together in a forum to debate the future of the world. “Why not in . . . Jerusalem?”⁸²

Engaging in conversation with representatives of the three main revealed monotheisms on the basis of the father functions they promote, however, leads inevitably to engaging in a comparative evaluation of them that results in the demotion of Islam. This may be surprising for several reasons, not the least of which is the massive influence Aristotle had on Islamic philosophy. Given that, according to Freud and Kristeva in his wake, the first civilizing step that the subject of psychoanalysis takes is his (or her) budding use of language, we naturally refer back to the first iteration of this thesis in Book I of Aristotle’s *Politics* where he recounts in unforgettable terms our passage from *phonē* to *logos*.⁸³ While confessing that she hasn’t “‘reflected a great deal’ upon the relationship between Greek culture and Christianity, nor upon the relationship between the three monotheisms,”⁸⁴ Kristeva does acknowledge that “we owe to such great masters as Avicenna and Averroes the ‘discovery’ and diffusion of Aristotle, above all in Christian culture. [But] how venture into this vast domain without knowing the language and lacking all but secondhand information?”⁸⁵ She adds that, from her psychoanalytic perspective, what is fundamentally wrong with Islam is that “the contact with Aristotle has concealed the fact that Islam cut itself off from Jewish and Christian monotheism, in ruling out any idea of paternity in its idea of the divine, along with many other pivotal points of the biblical-Gospel canon having to do with the loving bond between Creator and creatures. So, for instance, original sin doesn’t exist in Islam.”⁸⁶ (Unbelievers might find that this example is not the worst characteristic of Islam!) It may well have been quite strategic for Kristeva to have left Aristotle’s famous tale of language acquisition virtually out of *This Incredible*

Need to Believe because, as one reviewer has speculated in Kristeva's regard, "the problem with the world today is Islam, and the solution is Christianity."⁸⁷

But is psychoanalysis really foreclosed to Islam? What about Fethi Benslama's work?⁸⁸ While few can disagree with the condemnation of wanton violence currently carried out in the name of the third revealed religion, all three monotheisms have now long proven themselves to be stultifying for their acolytes and potentially dangerous to others—to believers in other gods, for instance, or to those who don't believe at all. As only one example, the history and current story of apostasy—the negation of belief—stands as a stark reminder of religion's dark side.

Kristeva nevertheless finds herself moved to admonish: "Don't be afraid of Christianity, and together we won't fear religions!" . . . [to her] agnostic, humanist, atheist friends. We hail from the same continent of thought."⁸⁹ She continues:

We often rise up "against" each other because we are in reality "right against" one another; let us continue our analyses . . . [sic] And I have a dream: may true complicities, essential in our face to face with the rise of barbarity, be woven not only, and to my way of thinking less, between Christianity and the other religions today tempted by fundamentalism, but between Christianity and this vision to which I adhere that grows out of Christianity, although it is detached from it today, and has the ambition to elucidate the perilous paths of freedom. In his person and his acts Jean [sic] Paul II made this dream possible. Far more than sainthood, this pope has shown us his universal dimension.⁹⁰

VIII

While "at a time when religious doctrines held unrestricted sway,"⁹¹ when we understood little, that is, and misunderstood even more about ourselves and the world around us, Freud might have conceded faith's capacity to provide comfort to us, to serve as a "narcotic that makes living easier,"⁹² "it is doubtful whether men were in general happier . . . more moral they certainly were not."⁹³ So if the need to believe is so wondrous and irrepressible that it must be deemed no less than "incredible," and given all the beautiful and innovative reflections Kristeva makes about motherhood, why not work to shift the basis for the bastion against barbarism (and improve humanism too) to the introjection of a loving mother?

Indeed, we need not fear Christianity—or religions in general. We should, however, recognize that channel for belief for what it is: an obsolete mental formation (Freud) whose supersession is long overdue. Because of "the religious prohibition of thought. . . it is worth making the experiment of an irreligious education."⁹⁴ And since the "infantile prototype" exploited by religion is to "especially" fear "one's father,"⁹⁵ it seems to me that seriously considering matriarchy might make for a worthwhile experiment in the irreligious reeducation of our species.

I will close with a cautionary tale in a trice that fairly illustrates the failure of belief in face of thought, which it is always determined to prohibit when necessary for maintaining its hegemony. The day the latest (as of my writing of this article) mass murder took place at Santa Fe High School in the U.S. state of Texas, one could read *incredulously* the following observation of *fact*: “They are praying today in Santa Fe, Tex. They often are, but after Friday, the need feels bottomless.”⁹⁶ In face of the obvious, the reasonable, and the rational, the factual, faith cannot hold a candle.

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NOTES

1. “Preuve—Ne m’a jamais intéressé—je crois. Mais je crois aussi qu’on ne doit jamais y renoncer: toujours plus de raison et de lumière, afin de sauver l’improbable en ses confins ultimes, ceux de l’autre. Je n’aime que la foi, ou plutôt dans la foi, son épreuve irreligieuse.” Jacques Derrida, “Jacques Derrida: Épreuves d’écriture,” *Cahiers philosophiques* 117, no. 1, *Les Introuvables des Cahiers* (April 2009): 90. Derrida’s entry is dated 10 October with no year indicated, but since it was written for *Les Immatériaux*, an exhibition curated by Jean-François Lyotard and inaugurated in March 1985 at the Centre Georges Pompidou, we may assume Derrida wrote this on October 10, 1984.

2. Julia Kristeva, *Bisogno di credere: Un punto di vista laico*, trans. M. Guerra (Rome: Donzelli Editorie, 2006); *Cet incroyable besoin de croire* (Paris: Bayard, 2007); *This Incredible Need to Believe*, trans. Beverly Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

3. “From Jesus to Mozart (Christianity’s Difference),” “Suffering” (the Lenten Lecture delivered on 19 March 2006), “The Genius of Catholicism,” and “Don’t Be Afraid of European Culture,” in Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, chs. 2–5.

4. Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); *Au commencement était l’amour: Psychanalyse et foi* (Paris: Hachette, 1985).

5. Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); *Les Nouvelles Maladies de l’âme* (Paris: Fayard, 1993). Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); *Le Féminin et le sacré* (Paris: Stock, 1998).

6. Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); *La Haine et le pardon: Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse III* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

7. Julia Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila*, trans. Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); *Thérèse mon amour: Sainte Thérèse d’Avila* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

8. “A secular point of view.”

9. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, xv.

10. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), 16.

11. *Ibid.*, 17.

12. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 3.
13. Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1993), 86; *Essais*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), 193.
14. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 15.
15. Immanuel Kant, "On the Canon of Pure Reason: Third Section, On having an opinion, knowing, and believing," *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 822, B 850.
16. Francis Bacon, *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum Libri IX* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018). Tom van Malssen, *The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon: On the Unity of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 163.
17. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 31.
18. *Ibid.*, 55.
19. *Ibid.*, 33.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, vii.
22. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* trans. Joseph J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 131.
23. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, vii.
24. *Ibid.*, xvi.
25. *Ibid.*, 67.
26. *Ibid.*, 76.
27. *Ibid.*, 1.
28. *Ibid.*, 70.
29. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 49.
30. *Ibid.*, 47.
31. "In what does the peculiar value of religious ideas lie?" *Ibid.*, 15.
32. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, ix.
33. *Ibid.*, 2.
34. *Ibid.*, 29.
35. *Ibid.*, x.
36. *Ibid.*, 4.
37. *Ibid.*, 9.
38. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
39. *Ibid.*, xi.
40. *Ibid.*, 10.
41. *Ibid.*, 57.
42. *Ibid.*, 58.
43. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 43.
44. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 4.
45. *Ibid.*, xiv.
46. *Ibid.*, xv.
47. *Ibid.*, 1.
48. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 53.
49. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 4.
50. *Ibid.*, 49.
51. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 19.
52. *Ibid.*, 22.
53. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
54. *Ibid.*, 27.
55. *Ibid.*, 28.
56. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 30.
57. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 41.
58. *Ibid.*, 56.

59. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* 131. "The wretchedness of the religious is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. Thus, the critique of religion is the critique in embryo of the vale of tears of which religion is the halo."

60. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 11.

61. *Ibid.*, 66.

62. John 3:16.

63. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 60.

64. Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 32.

65. *Ibid.*, 24. Freud is here referring to his findings in *Totem and Taboo*.

66. *Ibid.*, 26.

67. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth: 1964), 57.

68. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 38.

69. Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: A Year of Acting Dangerously* (London: Melville House, 2017), 120–21.

70. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 12.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, 27.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*, 11.

77. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 35.

78. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 11.

79. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 38.

80. *Ibid.*, 11.

81. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 26–27.

82. *Ibid.*, 63.

83. Aristotle, *Politics*, in *The Completed Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols., ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Book I, §10.

84. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 56. The words "reflected a great deal" are in inner quotes because Kristeva repeats the phrase from her interlocutor's question.

85. *Ibid.*, 65.

86. *Ibid.*, 67.

87. Mary-Jane V. Rubenstein, "Review of Julia Kristeva: *This Incredible Need to Believe* (Columbia, 2009)," *Division II Faculty Publications*, Paper 148 (January 2010): 666.

88. Fethi Benslama, *La Psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* (Paris: Aubier, 2002).

89. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 106.

90. *Ibid.*

91. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 37.

92. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, vii.

93. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 37.

94. *Ibid.*, 48.

95. *Ibid.*, 17.

96. Vivian Yee and Amy Harmon, "'Please Pray': Santa Fe Is a Town That Has Long Found Comfort in Faith," *New York Times*, May 18, 2018.