

Kristeva, Religion and Revolt Culture

Julia Kristeva is among the most prolific and influential modern European thinkers. Her work spans the fields of semiotics, philosophy, art history, literary, feminist and cultural theory, to name a few, and is notably informed by her practice as a psychoanalyst. The present study investigates Kristeva on religion, which is of interest (and also a challenge) because her theories on this topic are widely perceived as ambiguous. On one hand, she has often stated that she does not believe in God; she has described religious consolation as illusory¹ (à la Freud) and continues to submit psychoanalysis and aesthetic practices as methods of dealing with suffering that are superior to religion.² On the other hand, Judeo-Christian themes and imagery are unmistakably woven throughout Kristeva's work. She frequently evokes religious language and appeals to biblical figures, Christian theologians and mystics, especially – and notably – in her three most recent books.³ This paper attempts to clarify and focus Kristeva's views on religion.⁴

The primary texts for this study are volumes one and two of *The Power and Limits of Psychoanalysis: The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* (2000) & *Intimate Revolt* (2002). I am interested in these sources because much of Kristeva's academic reception has focused on

¹ J. Kristeva & Catherine Clément, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (NY: Columbia UP, 2001 [1998]), p. 25. See also, J. Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (NY: Columbia UP, 1988 [1985]), pp. 12-13.

² Arthur Bradley writes: "If her texts have a common thesis, it is that Christianity is merely the historical stage on which essentially psychoanalytic desires are played out: Christianity may well be an important historical precursor to psychoanalysis but, crucially, psychoanalysis is the true successor and replacement of Christianity," in "Mystic Atheism': Julia Kristeva's negative Theology," *Theology & Sexuality* 14/3 (2008): 281.

³ They are : *La haine et le pardon: pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse, tome 3*. Paris: Fayard, 2005. *Cet incroyable besoin de croire*. Paris: Bayard, 2007. And *Thérèse mon amour*. Paris : Fayard, 2008.

⁴ In her more recent work, Kristeva's use of the term 'religion' appears to have broadened to include what she calls "the great monotheistic religions." However, keep in mind that even with her common reference to the "Judeo-Christian" tradition (a conflation for which she has been criticized), her personal experience places her literally and figuratively in close proximity to the Orthodox and Catholic Christian traditions.

theories from early publications.⁵ Her recent work, on the other hand, has received relatively little attention by scholars of religion and, thus, may be able to provide us with some important new insights.⁶

In *The Power and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Kristeva describes the modern Western subject as in a state of anxiety or restlessness, which she attributes to a radical decline in what she calls *revolt culture*. In her view, Europe was once deeply religious, and had a rich aesthetic culture. Now, she argues, religion, art and literature *as revolt* are fading practices. In Europe, but also to be sure in the greater Western world, society is becoming a culture of distraction. We are losing the ability to *participate* in the world and to create meaning; we are becoming normalized and automated, “submerged as we are in the culture of entertainment, the culture of performance, the culture of the show.”⁷ Consequently, we are losing the capacity to elaborate and express our inner lives, and relationships with others are often shallow or non-existent; an empty or unsettled state of being ensues, which can lead to a variety of neuroses, such as depression, or acting-out in riots and other forms of violence.⁸ This is not an entirely new observation for Kristeva; the trilogy of the 80s, as well as *New Maladies of the Soul* (1993), anticipates this diagnosis. Here, however, she theorizes a possible countermeasure: to develop a modern culture of revolt. To be clear, she is not advocating revolt in the typical sense of the word, as in a collective uprising or a mass rebellion. As we will see, she posits a kind of revolt that takes place on an individual, personal level, a revolt that recognizes and rejuvenates our intra and extra-psychic lives, what she calls an *intimate* revolt.

⁵ Such as: her articulation of semiotic and symbolic modes of language, subjectivity as a process (*le sujet en procès*), abjection, melancholy, motherhood and love. I am referring to her 1970s and 80s publications.

⁶ Here I am referring to her work from the 1990s and onwards, which includes, for example, theories of foreignness, nationalism, and a re-conceptualization of the notion of revolt.

⁷ J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt: The Power and Limits of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 1*, trans. Jeanine Herman (NY: Columbia UP, 2000 [1996]), p. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 6-9.

More specifically then, the aim of this paper is to elucidate Kristeva's views on religion in light of her theories on revolt and revolt culture, with a view to showing that a) the apparent ambivalence of her thoughts on religion is a strategic contribution toward her vision for the future of Western culture, and b) while her criticisms may be convincing with respect to *certain forms* of religion, her theory of intimate revolt nevertheless leaves open the possibility that (other forms of) religion might fit into her vision of a culture of revolt.

Why Revolt?

From Freud to Bataille to Girard, among others, one learns that a primordial act of violence is foundational to both subject and social formation. In Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913), we read of an "original" primal scene, the elements of which are inscribed in the Oedipal structure of our psyches and which mark the inception of a society that is regulated by prohibitions and laws. A horde of brothers conspires to murder their tyrannical father, who has taken all the women for himself. After the parricide, in an attempt to assimilate his power, the sons eat the flesh of their father. Following the victory feast, however, the brothers are left with an overwhelming sense of remorse. They build a totem in honour of their father, as a symbol of the power he had and will always have over them. The collective triumphant revolt against authority, as well as the shared sense of guilt, produces a sense of inclusion and identity and establishes a community among the sons. In order to prevent such a heinous crime from reoccurring, murder and incest become taboo and their prohibition becomes law. However, because these primal desires are bound to resurface, the original act of violence is necessarily reenacted through various social rites and religious rituals. Similarly, Kristeva points out, in terms of the individual psyche, the Oedipal conflict is also ultimately un-resolvable and must be

forever displaced and renewed.⁹ The Freudian model thus grounds Kristeva's claim that “[r]ebbellion is a condition necessary for the life of the mind and society...”¹⁰ In other words, because we are constituted, both as social and speaking beings, by this violent confrontation of the law – and its associated *jouissance* – revolt is a necessary element for our psychic health and development, and for healthy social interactions.¹¹

According to Kristeva, the history of Western philosophical, artistic and religious discourses reveals a tradition of “reenacting” the primal revolt – but the tradition is in peril. Kristeva identifies two features of modern society that contribute to the growing incapacity to revolt: a) the lack of identifiable and reliable authority figures and b) the commodification of the individual.¹²

First, Kristeva asserts that modern society no longer has a substantial “paternal” function. Religious, social and political institutions are being revealed more and more as corruptible or as already corrupt and as such, these discourses are losing their power to consolidate laws, norms and values. “[A]uthority, value and law have become empty, flimsy forms.”¹³ Without being able to locate authority, the subject has nothing/no one to revolt against.

Secondly, with the upsurge of consumer culture, Kristeva argues that the speaking subject is being replaced by the “patrimonial individual,” by which she means an aggregate of genetic codes and body parts and organs.¹⁴ As patrimonial individuals we are reduced to functionaries within an economic order; we consume commodities and/or are commodified (to the extent that bodies are enslaved and organs can be bought or sold). “We are expected to be

⁹ J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, pp. 76-7.

¹⁰ J. Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, Interviews and foreword by Philippe Petit, trans. Brian O’Keeffe, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles & NY: Semiotext(e), 2002 [1998]), p. 85.

¹¹ See. J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, chapters 1&2 for a generous discussion.

¹² See K. Oliver, “Revolt and Forgiveness,” in *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: the Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva’s Polis*, eds. Tina Chanter & Ewa P. Ziarek (New York: SUNY, 2005), Chapter 4, pp. 77-82.

¹³ J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, p. 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 6.

performing entities. At best, we are asked to work well and to buy as much as possible.”¹⁵ In brief, then, modern Western culture does not facilitate the establishment of singular, speaking beings. Thus, not only are we losing locatable authorities to revolt against, eventually there could be no more subjects to revolt.

Intimate Revolt

In order to revive this culture of revolt, Kristeva says we need to return to the *intimate*: “Faced with the invasion of the spectacle, we can still contemplate the rebellious potentialities that the imaginary might resuscitate in our innermost depths.”¹⁶ As stated above, Kristeva does not speak of revolt in the typical sense of the word. Rather, she re-conceptualizes the notion of revolt by drawing on, for one, its etymological and literary sense, which is to discover, to open, unveil, and also to turn, and return. She emphasizes its potential both to rupture and to renew.¹⁷

Kristeva’s conception of revolt is also derived from the analytic experience. Based on Freud’s essay, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914), she highlights three particular moments in the analytic experience that contain within them this new sense of revolt. The first is *memory-trace*, which describes the phenomenon of unconscious memories (of events or feelings) that repeatedly (re)surface, through dreams, for example, or somatic experiences. The recurrence of the memory-trace points to the permanence of the unconscious drives. Secondly, she describes the moment of *working-through*, which is the process of identification, confrontation and repossession of one’s demons, desires and/or traumas that takes place during the act of transference. This moment is seen as one of revolt because it involves stagnation of consciousness, interruption of lived experience and resistance to interpretation in

¹⁵ J. Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, pp. 100-1.

¹⁶ J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Power and Limits of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 2*, trans. Jeanine Herman (NY: Columbia UP, 2002 [1997-8]), p. 13.

¹⁷ J. Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, p. 85.

order to work through and carry on.¹⁸ Finally, there is the *dissolution of transference*. At the end of analysis the subject is faced with the “death” of his/her analyst and, having identified with the analyst, the analysand is also threatened by a symbolic death (of the ego). This (double) death, while it often incites a kind of melancholy, is survived through the “re-creation of the transference dynamic with other others.”¹⁹ This is Kristeva’s interpretation of Freud’s “interminable analysis,” which is linked to her notion of revolt as repetition as well as renewal.

By emphasizing the elements of revolt in the psychoanalytic process, Kristeva reinforces her argument that revolt culture is not intended as some kind of political anarchy.²⁰ Rather, she is advocating revolt as a personal, individual process of introspective, retrospective, and repetitive questioning. However, note that as an *intimate*, psychic process, it is a questioning that is as much affective and bodily as it is a thought process.

Intimate revolt is not confined to the subject of psychoanalysis. Kristeva identifies intellectual pursuits (e.g. academia), art, and (especially) literature among the practices through which individuals can recall, create, re-create, through which they might question meaning and values, express unrest, and sublimate conflict. “[I]t’s by banking on the individual microcosm, by rehabilitating and valorizing it, by restoring pride in love, desire, and revolt, that society has a chance to avoid ossifying into the mere act of managing business.”²¹ In other words, we need to cultivate an environment in which individual anxieties and conflicts are confronted and represented, that is, a culture of psychic or intimate revolt.

Replacing Religion?

Notably missing from Kristeva’s description of a future culture of revolt is religion. In

¹⁸ J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 36.

¹⁹ J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 40.

²⁰ Though she believes there would be political ramifications. See J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 86.

fact, she argues that revolt may very well entail the surpassing of *homo religiosus*.²² This is not completely out-of-the-blue for Kristeva, who has been in search of secular replacements (read: art, literature, psychoanalysis) for failing religious discourses arguably since the 80s.²³ And the search continues in *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, where she asks: “what modern modes might re-create what was in the not-so-distant past the jouissance of the religious man?”²⁴ The question, then, is why, if the sacred-social link is founded on a primal rebellion, if religious ritual sacrifices, dances and incantations etc. are nothing less than coded revolts,²⁵ as Kristeva states, why, then, is she seeking replacements for it?

A lot more space is needed to thoroughly address this question; for our purposes today, I shall only highlight some key factors that one finds in the two volumes in question, and related material. For one, fewer people are religious. Kristeva observes a decline in Church attendance and a rise in popular hostility toward religion. The Church and other religious institutions are among the aforementioned authorities that are being revealed as corruptible, unstable and generally losing influence. At the same time, however, she recognizes that some people have held fast to their faiths and that others are discovering or returning to religion. But she is skeptical of these modern variants. Rather than representing our psychic need for transgression and symbolizing our heterogeneous and abject nature – missing in the Christian tradition especially – religion today serves primarily to subdue neurotic symptoms, suppress anxieties and desires, and thereby inhibits creativity; it is a de-sacralized version of religion. She also sees a return to religious or ideological spiritualism,²⁶ which, by cutting the body off from the mind

²² J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, p. 24.

²³ See S. Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: psychoanalysis and modernity*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2004, Chapter 5, for a more extensive treatment of Kristeva’s critique of Christianity.

²⁴ J. Kristeva, *The Sense & Non-Sense of Revolt*, p. 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 14.

²⁶ J. Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, p. 91.

and denigrating it, precludes the possibility of intimate revolt.²⁷

Finally, (and here her critique is not limited to Christianity) she sees an *increase* in insular and exclusionary religious communities. The goal of the psychoanalytic model of intimate revolt is to facilitate “the well-being of the subject, as it results from his capacity to establish as many optimal connections with others as possible. This is not out of a concern to make him useful to a community whose criteria we might have established (which is what ideologies and religions do) but in order to allow him a plurality of connections in communities that can change and can be questioned.”²⁸ There are many contemporary examples of how attachment to a group identity can result in (violent) conflict. Kristeva thus criticizes contemporary religion because – echoing Freud – it makes truth claims that cannot be refuted or questioned as well as its tendency to exclude others, characteristics which are incompatible with her vision of revolt.

It can be argued that religion has always done this. It has always been exclusionary. But this is arguably a more drastic problem today than it has been because the lack of revolt culture coincides with a rapidly diversifying society. When individuals lack a sense of community, which precipitates from a lack of intimate revolt, they deal with their feelings of exclusion by seeking to exclude others.²⁹ This can easily be seen in what appears to be an increasingly global intolerance of difference. “Repressive returns to systems foregrounding the needs of identity are resurfacing, nationalism, traditionalism, conservatism, fundamentalism, and so on.”³⁰ Hence, for Kristeva, we need to find new ways to revolt.

²⁷ In contrast, Kristeva identifies various mystics of the Middle Ages as well as St. Augustine and his “register of interiority” as examples of the kind of intimacy characteristic of intimate revolt, in *Intimate Revolt*, p. 46.

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 233-4.

²⁹ See K. Oliver, pp. 78-9.

³⁰ J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, p. 19.

Kristeva's "Return" to Religion

In spite of these criticisms, there is an unmistakable umbilical attachment to Christianity in Kristeva's writing,³¹ particularly in her recent work, which is my focus. Consider, for example, the following passage, cited at length from the third and final volume of *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*:

À l'écoute de mes analysants, qui se transfèrent de leur lieu natal au lien nouveau et provisoire du processus analytique, qui se perdent dans leurs symptômes et s'absentent d'eux-mêmes, mais aussi qui me perdent et s'absentent de moi pour ouvrir de nouveaux passages, passerelles, transitions, rebonds de ce qu'ils croyaient leur être « propre » vers d' « autres » personnes, objets, projets, mots, pensées – infiniment, indéfiniment, dans une communauté à venir incertaine et ouvert –, *je reprends la Bible et le relis*. Exode, exil, retour: « ils me parlent » dans notre souci commun, et cependant si différent pour chacun, de vivre une vie possible, non pas sécurisée mais exposée et néanmoins renouvelable, donc créative, dans un monde où l'exode s'est généralisé et dans lequel, pourtant, les hostilités entre autochtones et exilés n'ont jamais été aussi brutales, aussi invivables.³²

Note also that her 2007 publication *Cet Incroyable Besoin de Croire* includes a chapter based on a dialogue in which she participated at the Church of Notre-Dame for the prestigious *Conférences de carême* (Lenten services) in Paris in 2006, as well as a text written in honour of Pope Jean-Paul II after his death.³³ Moreover, her latest publication is devoted to Teresa of Avila.³⁴ It is perhaps understandable, then, that some are suspicious of her suggestion that revolt might move beyond religion. I submit, however, that Kristeva's persistent return to Christianity and Christian constructs can be better understood in light of her theory of revolt.

Kristeva tells us that intimate revolt is *a return and a process*.³⁵ Implied in her re-

³¹ Arthur Bradley writes, for example, "[t]here is an important sense in which her psychoanalytic critique of Christianity remains – both wittingly and unwittingly – complicit with Judaeo-Christian theology she is attempting to question" (287).

³² J. Kristeva, *La haine et le pardon*, p. 438. My emphasis.

³³ J. Kristeva, *Cet incroyable besoin de croire*, pp. 159-182.

³⁴ J. Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*.

³⁵ J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, p. 50.

conceptualization of revolt, as outlined above, is that it is not only reasonable but perhaps *necessary* to return to religion, rather than abandon it. Revolt culture, as we have seen, is an interminable process. It may be an illusory therapy but it is like an unconscious memory-trace inscribed into Kristeva's personal history³⁶ as well as in the consciousness of Western subjectivity. The following reflection found in a correspondence with Catherine Clement is suggestive of Kristeva "working-through" a resurfacing memory-trace:

Those who understand analytical experience – in any case, with me – are rarely believers. Some have been, most are not at all, or, almost not at all. So I rarely hear people talk about God, and, when it happens, as you can imagine, my 'free-floating attention' momentarily fastens, even crystallizes, on that word. I experience a hint of shame at the idea of that curiosity; might it prove that God has not completely abandoned me, as I have a tendency to believe ordinarily?³⁷

Is this questioning not a form of intimate revolt? I argue that Kristeva's writing on religion in general can be read as a commitment to revolt, that is, a commitment to remembering, working-through and continually analyzing Christianity. This is not a self-contradiction for Kristeva has said that "it is by traversing Christianity that the free subjectivity of men and women flourishes. By traversing, that is, by knowing and analyzing: not by becoming imprisoned within it."³⁸ Thus, it is important for the realization of a culture of revolt to acknowledge and confront the insertion of our religious past into our present psychic and social lives. In light of this, revolt culture perhaps invites us not to move *beyond* religion, but rather, to confront and move *through* religion – which is not the same thing. I do not intend to make claims about what Kristeva does or does not believe. I argue, rather, that those who see her work as Christian nostalgia or apologetics would do well to first consider her notion of intimate revolt.

³⁶ She was raised in an Orthodox family in Bulgaria and educated by French Dominican nuns in a Catholic school; her father was deeply religious and she is named after a saint.

³⁷ J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, p. 23. See also pages 46-47 where she talks specifically about the development of her feelings on God and faith.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 165.

Religion and Revolt Today

Having attended to the so-called ambivalence of Kristeva's thought on religion, I would like to now address the question of whether or not religion might contribute to a culture of revolt. While first impressions may say otherwise, I submit that it can. Here is why: As one who lays so much import on personal histories and one who takes pains to avoid meta-narratives and totalizing theories, I find that Kristeva falls prey to a familiar reductionism in her claims against religion in the context of revolt. She has argued that what contributes to our lack of revolt culture is "the weakening of religions, or their worldly or fundamentalist return."³⁹ In other words, universalizing, exclusionary, non-thinking forms of religion are under attack here. The same point has been argued in terms of Freud's critique of religion and I think it is just as important here to remember that "religion" is far from a monolithic category. Thus, there is room, as I see it, to consider the space between non-thinking, dogmatic believers and critically-minded non-believers. This is where I feel we might theorize/envision a religious subject who is capable of intimate revolt.

I admit that this part of my research needs further fleshing out, but allow me to suggest possible examples of intimate revolt in religion today. Consider the response to Islamic fundamentalism by (primarily feminist, but not exclusively) Muslim reformers, which has resulted in an increasing number of (public and published) inquiries into and critiques of traditions by practicing Muslims as well as non-practicing ones. In fact, one should also take into account all of the feminist revisions and critiques that are prevalent in many traditions. Consider also the North American trend of progressive Christian theology, in which believers actively call into question their own faiths, traditions and foundational constructs. Finally,

³⁹ Ibid. p. 33.

liberation theology also comes to mind (even though it is at the heart of literal revolts) because it continues to be the source of challenging social and political structures of oppression.

These examples are surely debatable, especially because I have focused on movements and groups rather than individuals. However, they indicate the (underlying) presence of some individual religious *anxiety* and critical thought, elements central to Kristeva's intimate revolt. To be sure, an overly-attached or fixated identity to any of the above-mentioned forms of religiosity could degenerate into a subjectivity that is reflexive and automated, rather than reflective; they must continue to question themselves. But perhaps one can now perceive of *certain forms* of religion today that might serve as a site for revolt.

Closing Discussion

I have argued that Kristeva's treatment of Christianity is not ambivalent; rather it can be interpreted as an example of her own intimate revolt. I have also argued that while she is critical of religion, not all forms of religion and religious belief fit into her critique, and thus, religious subjects today might very well participate in and contribute to a revolt culture.

These conclusions incite further discussion. We have seen that as a constant questioning, a displacement of the past, a confrontation of memory and renewal, intimate revolt invites new possibilities into old discourses. Thus, it would be exciting to explore in more depth the *nature* as well as the political implications of a modern religious subject in revolt. It is noteworthy, for example, that the aforementioned examples are all incidences of religious traditions that, to some extent, have come into contact or fused with various modes of critical thought (i.e. Liberal, Marxist, Feminist etc.).⁴⁰ It is also interesting to think about what kind of mind is necessary for this kind of revolt, a question Marsha Hewitt has explored in relation to religious

⁴⁰ I am indebted to Dr. James DiCenso for this observation.

belief and attachment theory.⁴¹ And finally, if religion does not necessarily impede revolt in the sense Kristeva is advocating, then there are important implications to be considered in terms of the role of religion in the public sphere. Kristeva specifically remarks that to revolt (in her sense of the word) is “being able to take a position in order to assume a judgment in a specific situation and being capable of questioning things from the place of another subject.”⁴² Thus, if religion can be a site for revolt, then possibilities open up, both theoretically and practically, in terms of communication between religious and secular subjects.

The question remains whether or not *any of us* are capable of this return to the intimate, or are we too deeply consumed by stories of vampires and reality T.V., too preoccupied with iPhones, Twitter and Facebook? I would like to think that a culture that questions and transforms itself is still possible, and a gathering of over four thousand people engaging in interpretive, philosophical and/or theological revolt is a sign that we should not give up hope. In other words, I submit that we might yet revive a culture of revolt.

⁴¹ M. Hewitt, “Attachment Theory, Religious Beliefs, and the Limits of Reason,” *Pastoral Psychology* 57 (2008).

⁴² J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 237.

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