

ISLAM'S TURN ON THE COUCH:
The Psychoanalytic Theorizing of Muslim Identity in
France

by

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INTRODUCTION

THIRTY YEARS AFTER *ORIENTALISM*

“You see, in trying to plumb the mysteries of Christianity, starting from analytical experience, but also starting from philosophy, art, and literature, which very often precede it, it appears, in effect, that Christ leads to Mozart: ...Christianity refines suffering into joy. Listen to the “Miserere Nobis” of the Mass in C Minor: the sacrifice resolves itself into serenity, then ecstasy. What an unexpected filiation! Allah’s madmen, among others, should give this some thought.”

—Julia Kristeva¹

These are the words of acclaimed French feminist scholar and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, published in her 2006 collection of lectures and interviews entitled, *This Incredible Need to Believe*.² Most of the writings gathered in the volume center around what Kristeva dubs the “prereligious need to believe,” which she considers to be both the foundation of human experience and a dangerous and potentially eruptive passion that requires maturation and mitigation. The analyst’s text responds to what she views as the global crisis of “fundamentalism and the wars of religion,” a challenge that she thinks reveals “a pressing need to radically reform humanism.”³ And yet her “redefinition” of humanism, radical as it may be in its acknowledgement of its religious roots, here takes the form of an exaltation of the magnificence of Christianity and its cultural products—including those that arose during the Enlightenment, in its very rupture from Christianity.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, trans. Beverly Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia Press, 2009), 84.

² Henceforth all references to this volume will be to “*This Incredible Need*” for brevity’s sake and all footnotes to “Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*.”

³ *Ibid*, 2.

This alone would not be troubling; Catholicism has certainly had its moments of glory and achievement. But Kristeva moves beyond her call for humanism to return to its Catholic roots. When she goes on to make claims about those who cannot call such roots their own, her argument veers into problematic territory. Certainly the most startling aspect of the passage above is her plea to “Allah’s madmen” to give Mozart a listen, to spend some time thinking about the spectacular cultural products of Christianity before embarking on presumed suicide missions. I took Kristeva’s advice (not because I am one of “Allah’s madmen,” but because I thought I might be included “among [the] others” addressed) and listened to the *Miserere Nobis*. It is incredibly powerful, and I found myself moved. But so powerful as to move me back in time, before the 1978 publication of Edward Saïd’s *Orientalism*? Mozart did not transport me to this period of cultural blindness, to the darkened days before Saïd shed light on the imaginary geographical line long established by Europeans that divided the globe into *us* and *them*, *ours* and *theirs*. The crooning of “kyrie” did not transport me to a world in which “The West” can make uninterrogated generalizations about “the Orient” and its inhabitants such that Westerners can define themselves in opposition to all that is oriental. I was not so moved as to believe that those who can call Christianity and humanism their progenitors are, by virtue of that genealogical claim, rational, civilized, cultured, and equipped to deal with suffering and violence, while those whose ears know no Mozart are crude, irrational, uncivilized, and prone to the shallow adolescent faith and accompanying fanatical violence that Kristeva explores elsewhere in her book.

Such claims about Mozart do not, to my mind, triumph over Saïd's theory of the Orientalism at work in European narratives and discourse. Instead, they frighteningly reinforce it, embodying all that Saïd criticized in 1978. But these claims come not from a nineteenth century novel, imagining and critiquing an exotic cultural landscape—they come from a text published in 2006, almost 30 years after the publication of Saïd's *Orientalism*, and what's more, they come from an eminent scholar who has garnered respect and fame for her sensitive engagement with love, melancholy, new conceptions of feminism, and the role of “the abject” in identity formation. Such claims come not from Jean-Marie Le Pen, or any member of *Le Front National*, France's most far-right political party, which regularly espouses xenophobic views; rather, they come from Kristeva, a feminist emblematic of France's left, a professor employed at Université Paris VII, often dubbed the “socialist” university of Paris.

But perhaps more startling than the claims themselves is the fact that they have been openly embraced, both in France and elsewhere. Alice Granger Guitard finishes her review by saying “With [Kristeva], and her feminine genius, and in the wake of the great Colette, rebirth is never outside of our reach!”⁴ Meanwhile in the United States, *Publisher's Weekly* deems the volume a “focused and insightful discussion of religious belief...compelling and remarkable for its staunch unwillingness to take sides.”⁵ The few critical reviews have come from Amy Hollywood, in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, and from Mary Jane

⁴ Alice Granger Guitard, Review of *This Incredible Need to Believe* by Julia Kristeva, e-litterature.net, 2007, my translation, http://www.e-litterature.net/publier2/spip/spip.php?page=article5&id_article=498.

⁵ *Publisher's Weekly*, Review of *This Incredible Need to Believe* by Julia Kristeva, 2009, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-231-14784-2>.

Rubenstein, in *Modern Theology*, two Americans writing for Christian publications—and notably, Hollywood’s review takes issue more with Kristeva’s ‘adolescent’ characterization of Christian mysticism than it does with her problematic treatment of Islam, the latter mentioned only in a footnote.

Yet what is most interesting about Kristeva’s treatment of Islam and its (largely positive) reception is not simply the orientalist binary to which she succumbs, but how she gets there. *This Incredible Need* takes a psychoanalytical approach. Entirely indebted to and inspired by Freud’s theories of religious experience, and chock-full of references to Freud and Lacan, Kristeva’s work is an example of an attempt to *psychoanalyze* Islam as though it were a troubled individual seeking professional help. As her argument goes, one reason why Christians are so good at compartmentalizing and transforming suffering is the patricide at the center of their theology—a patricide that Islam lacks. That lack, that inability to sublimate the death drive, fuels Kristeva’s treatment of Islam: from its fundamentalist outbursts, to the violent actions of adolescents in the French *banlieue*. Yet not once does the scholar engage with a single Muslim text, commentary, scholar, or theologian; her process of psychoanalysis apparently does not require such resources, though it does invoke the likes of Kant, Dante, Nietzsche, and Aristotle, as though the author were checking names off a “Great Western Books” syllabus.

Her analysis of Islam’s theology—which occurs within the span of two pages—leads Kristeva to her ultimate dismissive conclusion:

I fear...that certain distinctive features of Islam, outlined above, make an Islamic theo-logy improbable if not impossible and, similarly, any ‘discussion’ between Sunnis and Shiites, not to mention with the other two monotheisms. These distinctive features also handicap a possible opening of Islam toward the ethical and political problems raised by the freedoms, full

of risks, of the men and women of the third millennium and by the different ways of thinking in confrontation on these subjects.⁶

Islam is formulated in such a way that Kristeva deems discussion between its two main groups, and between it and Christianity and Judaism, “improbable, if not impossible.” No wonder she writes off conversation with Muslim sources, “handicapped” as they are to an opening “raised by...freedoms.” Yet this is, for Kristeva, “[a]ll the more reason not to throw up our arms before the terrifying, even terroristic, drift of these underlying currents of Islam, but to try to draw upon the most open of them” before attempting to reach mutual understanding.⁷ And all this terror because

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 vital points of the biblical-Gospel canon having to do with the *loving bond* between Creator and creatures.⁸

Lacking in divine paternity, patricide, father-love, neighbor-love, and Mozart, it becomes clear that Islam, for Kristeva, is the source of much that her new humanism must combat—in some ways, its danger has inspired the creation of this Catholicism-infused concept of humanism in the first place. It becomes the task of psychoanalysis, then, to “help to clear a space in which elucidation may replace *destructive confrontations* where regression and the explosion of the death instinct face off, the present danger to global humanity.”⁹

Kristeva’s attitude and my curiosity about the cultural environment that produced it was the impetus for this thesis. I found myself wondering how, almost

⁶ Kristeva, 68.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 67.

⁹ Ibid, 64.

three decades after the publication of *Orientalism*, a text like *This Incredible Need* can emerge from a renowned scholar with a reputation for cultural sensitivity. In a world in which Freud's theories (particularly those on religion) have steadily lost authority, why a reliance on them *now* in 2006, to understand a religion he did not endeavor to analyze himself? Why have the few outcries against the book come from American reviewers writing in American Christian publications? And why has France so overwhelmingly, so disturbingly, deemed this a work of critical and masterful scholarship?

While I cannot possibly determine the direct causes and lineage of the thinking, or the writing and publication decisions that enabled the existence of Kristeva's text, I can endeavor to understand the historical and cultural moment that produced it. These days, France's version of secularism, or *laïcité*, comes up frequently in discussions of Islam—mostly because of the problems Islam is thought to pose for *laïcité*. Secularization in France is largely viewed as a cultural product of the French Revolution of 1789, which is often envisioned as a founding moment of modernity. Along with the overturning of the monarchy, “the mighty Roman Catholic Church in its French incarnation was nationalized by the state; priests who swore allegiance to the French Republic became the state's paid agents, while the clergy who did not swear were left to perform illicit masses underground,” historian and theorist Joan Wallach Scott explains. “Signs of religious devotion (statues of saints, crucifixes, church bells) were replaced by allegorical embodiments of secular concepts (liberty, fraternity, equality, the social contract, philosophy, reason, virtue),

in idealized classical forms.”¹⁰ One should note that *laïcité*, though often translated to “secularism” or “separation of church and state,” is not simply the French equivalent of the American version. Instead, it can be conceived of as a separation of religion from any aspect of public life, the goal of which is to protect the sanctity of the public sphere—not, as in America, to protect the sanctity of the multitude of religious practitioners from intolerance or from the governmental favoring of one faith over another. French money is not adorned with an “In God We Trust”; French children do not invoke God every morning in a mandatory pledge of allegiance. If there is a God in French nationalism, it is the values of the revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—and perhaps, one could include, *laïcité*—that fulfill the divine function. As has been seen in recent years, with no God pulling the strings of France’s social contract, when the sanctity of its values is perceived as threatened, the *pays* feels the vulnerability of its national unity. Islam is seen as the source of major threats, both theological and social. The question has become, as Hilal Elver puts it, “whether Islam is compatible with modernity and *laïcité*.”¹¹

The question’s urgency stems largely from France’s veil controversies, a topic that while not explicitly addressed in *This Incredible Need*, seems to be lurking between the lines describing the “destructive [religious] confrontations” Kristeva tells us France has witnessed. By far the most publicized embodiment of the country’s confrontation with its practicing Muslim residents lies in the word ‘veil;’ it is likely at least in part due to such controversies that Kristeva’s interviewer poses questions

¹⁰ Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 92. Henceforth “Scott, *The Fantasy*.”

¹¹ Hilal Elver, *The Headscarf Controversy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126. Henceforth “Elver, *The Headscarf*.”

about Islam.¹² In three separate moments in 1989, 1993, and 2003, what has come to be referred to as “*l’affaire du voile*,” or “the headscarf scandal,” captured media and political attention. In 1989, three girls who refused to remove their headscarves were expelled from their middle school in the town of Creil by a principal who claimed to be enforcing *laïcité*. The matter was referred to the *Conseil d’État*, the highest administrative court in France, which ruled that the wearing of signs of religious affiliation alone should not be grounds for expulsion. As long as these signs were not polemical and coupled with a wearer’s behavior of pressuring, provoking, or proselytizing, the wearing of signs in and of itself in public school was ruled as not necessarily incompatible with *laïcité*. The ultimate judicial ruling allowed school authorities to decide on a case-by-case basis whether a headscarf was admissible. 1993 saw an attempt by the minister of education, François Bayrou, to pass a law that would ban inherently ostentatious religious symbols (as opposed to discrete ones); passage failed, but under President Jacques Chirac eleven years later, a policy outlawing all conspicuous signs of religious affiliation in public schools came to fruition. But the issue did not die: a decade later, in 2003, when sisters Alma and Lila Levy¹³ were excluded from school because of their refusal to remove their headscarves, they—and once again, the issue of the veil—quickly became the focus of public discourse. In fact, “by the end of 2003, the leading editorials and opinion

¹² Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 64. See the question “Does Islam share in this trend of monotheism? Where does its warlike spirit come from? Might Allah be closer to the God of Aristotle than God of the Creator?”

¹³ The last name may surprise readers; Alma and Lila Levy were born to a Jewish (and militant atheist) father and an Algerian non-practicing Muslim mother. The story of these two sisters is now well known in France; Alma is quoted as saying “...if you want to defend an oppressed woman, then don’t oppress another one.” The Daily Reminders: Worlds Local Muslim Site, “Story of 2 Sisters Living in France,” 5 January 2013, <http://thedailyreminders.com/story-of-2-sisters-living-in-france/>.

makers of the press had, with very few exceptions, accepted a monolithic interpretation of the headscarf as the signifier of an aggressive Islamism that challenges the most basic rules of republican coexistence.”¹⁴

These controversies—and the media attention, feminist outcries, and Islamophobic finger-pointing that accompanied them—have been pored over by scholars, mostly non-French, who were fascinated by the amount of attention that managed to surround a piece of cloth. Why did the French so adamantly disapprove of headscarves? It was clearly not the look itself, but the symbolism of it that irked them—why? These questions were those that enticed American historian Joan Scott, Turkish global legal scholar Hilal Elver, and Turkish-Jewish political scientist and philosopher Seyla Benhabib, among countless others, to explore the headscarf case in France; they are also questions that can help to illuminate Kristeva’s context when she dignifies interview questions about “Islam’s war-like spirit” with a response. The veil scholars mentioned above are both dismayed and enthralled by the staunch anti-scarf French legal position, which they believe to be indicative of a sort of othering—whether they call it racism, Islamophobia, or plain old discrimination—that masks itself in legal justifications. It is important to note that this is not the widely held view within France; though some have come out against the headscarf ban, many progressive groups and feminists speak on behalf of gender issues and basic humanitarianism that they feel to be threatened by the veil. Benhabib, Scott and Elver embody different perspectives and employ different methodologies, but all of them

¹⁴ Elver, *The Headscarf*, 116.

work outside of France, and each in some way sees herself as confronting an embedded French *mentalité*.

Most of these scholars understand their projects as those that deal in French *conceptions* of Islam as opposed to Islam itself in France, primarily because they claim that *the veiled women themselves have no voice in the debate*. This is not universally true; several feminist pro-veiling groups which include Muslim members have taken up the fight against the veil ban.¹⁵ But the voices of veil-wearers were suspiciously absent from French media and scholarship in the wake of the 1989 Creil incident; and as Elver notes: “it is striking that women with headscarves are presented as nonautonomous subjects.”¹⁶ Both Benhabib and Scott note the absence of Muslim insight (specifically, female Muslim insight) into the political situation; Benhabib discusses the “epistemic interest in power” that “leads to the silencing of dissenting opinions and contradictory perspectives, and yields dominant master narratives of what the cultural tradition is, who is in, and who is out.”¹⁷ Among the aforementioned scholars, there is agreement that a master narrative is being imposed upon voiceless veiled bodies for some political end—but what is that narrative exactly and why is France so intent on telling it?

Part of this project of defining and maintaining “the cultural tradition” can be better understood if we compare French and American concepts of citizenship and secularism. Scott explores and explains *communautarisme*, a fear often cited by those

¹⁵ One example is *Collectif des Féministes pour l’Égalité* (Collective of Feminists for Equality), whom I discuss on page 68.

¹⁶ Elver, *The Headscarf*, 119.

¹⁷ Seyla Benhabib, “Multiculturalism, Laïcité, and the Scarf Affair in France,” *The Claims of Culture, Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 102. Henceforth “Benhabib, *Multiculturalism*.”

who support the ban on the headscarf. *Communautarisme*, often translated as ‘communalism,’ “refers to the priority of group over national identity in the lives of individuals; in theory there is no possibility of a hyphenated ethnic/national identity—one belongs either to a group or to the nation.”¹⁸ American multiculturalism is often offered as a negative example of the embodiment of communalism, of an unstable terrain fraught with group identity politics and ethnic conflicts. Scott explains that the natural right of equality attributed to each individual “is achieved, in French political theory, by making one’s social, religious, ethnic, and other origins irrelevant in the public sphere,”¹⁹ a claim that finds support in documents dating back to the revolution of 1789.²⁰ Equality in France may not translate to equality in America, the notable difference being that equality in France relies on civic *homogeneity*, an idea I will consider as I use Freud later in this project to think through the possibility for a heterogeneous collective identity.

But is the motivation for maintaining homogeneity truly to ensure *laïcité*? An accusation often flung against French arguments for banning the veil is that there exists no static entity called *laïcité*—rather, the term is deployed when useful for politicians. The work of Elver—a chapter within a larger volume on comparative global studies that statistically and legally explores the effects of veil mandates in various countries—compiles evidence of a longstanding fear and consequent racist treatment of “dangerous others,” of a need to preserve national unity and a

¹⁸ Joan W. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See, for example, *Qu’est-ce que le tiers état ?* a pamphlet by Abbé Sieyès first published in Paris in 1789 as discussed in Scott, *Politics of the Veil*, 18.

“Frenchness” that may have less to do with *laïcité* than its proponents claim.²¹ To Elver’s mind, Islamic fundamentalists are the most recent item on a list of fear-inspiring entities who are imagined to wield plots against Frenchness—before Islamic fundamentalists came the delinquent youth of postcolonial origin; before them, the communists; before them, the ‘yellow peril;’ before them, the Freemasons; and so on.²² American anthropologist John Bowen offers an argument compatible with Elver’s. Based on an analysis of media coverage and public discourse, he finds that there is no static historical actor called “*laïcité*,” and that a particular breed of *laïcité* was deployed in 1989 when “many in France saw Islam as a new threat and Muslim students as its carriers.”²³

Ultimately, the French insistence on its prized republican principles, *laïcité* chief among them, reflects not only an effort to maintain universalism as opposed to communalism—it is part of an effort to construct and continually reify a mythologized France. Though every nation-state derives power in mythologizing itself to some degree, the French situation is precarious precisely because of the nation’s irreligious center. Scott insists that the power and appeal of a France with enduring values inherited from the Enlightenment “rests, to a large degree, on its negative portrayal of Islam. The objectification of Muslims as a fixed ‘culture’ has its counterpart in the mythologizing of France as an enduring ‘republic.’ Both are imagined to lie outside history—antagonists locked in eternal combat.”²⁴ Such a notion certainly finds resonance in Kristeva’s *This Incredible Need*; indeed, the work

²¹ Elver, *The Headscarf*, 124-128.

²² *Ibid*, 128.

²³ John Bowen, *Why the French Don’t like Headscarves: Islam, the State and Public Space*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 66. Henceforth “Bowen, *Why the French*.”

²⁴ Scott, *Politics of the Veil*, 7.

of co-construction—that which occurs between France/its Muslims, Europe/the Orient, modernity/tradition, and religion/secularism—is a theme that will resurface throughout this thesis.

Perhaps one can find validity in the assertions that the constant call to uphold *laïcité* is little more than hollow semantics when viewed in conjunction with recent scholarship that complicates the formerly commonly held notion of a “secular France.” While many have offered statistically-enforced arguments for a process of Dechristianisation in France²⁵, Thomas Kselman, in his essay “The Dechristianisation of Death in Modern France,” in fact challenges, and perhaps adds sophistication, to the secularization narrative. In his historical analysis of the varying forms of religiosity in rituals surrounding death in France, Kselman concludes by contrasting the completely and shockingly secular burial ceremony of Victor Hugo at the end of the nineteenth century with the equally shockingly Catholic funeral and mass of François Mitterand, France’s first socialist president. This sharp contrast of secular to Catholic funeral settings “illustrate[s] how much has changed since the end of the nineteenth century, when the militant program of republican ‘laïcité’ would have made such collaboration unthinkable.”²⁶ Here he cites René Rémond, who said “*laïcité n’est plus ce qu’elle était*”²⁷—*laïcité* had changed in some way, and Kselman invites us to think about how. Is the contrast between the two funerals an indication

²⁵ See Michel Vovelle, (Micel Vovelle, Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1973). *Religion et Révolution: La Déchristianisation de l’an II* (1976): 56-68.), who argues that a process of dechristianisation was under way by the mid eighteenth century.

²⁶ Thomas Kselman, “The dechristianisation of death in modern France,” *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 157. Henceforth “Kselman, *The dechristianisation*.”

²⁷ Ibid.

that Catholicism has been absorbed into a French civil religion, “mixed...in a stew of nationalistic nostalgia which provides a kind of compensation for the decline of France as a world power?”²⁸

Perhaps such a conception of a French civil religion would allow us to better understand why Islam, a force that does not fit neatly into that paradigm, comes as such a threat to the national, to an arena supposedly religion-free. This is the larger political and historical question—of *laïcité* and its Catholic progenitors, and of whether it can ever possibly coexist with Islam in a way that resists confrontation—that has in many ways sparked attempts such as Kristeva’s to psychoanalyze Islam, to understand it and its relationship or potential relationship with modernity. But the accompanying political questions of accommodation and immigration are not the ones that Kristeva explores, nor are they ones that I will go on to explore here.

French Civil religion or none, scholarship has shown that neither *laïcité* nor Islam are static entities—and neither is psychoanalysis, for that matter. But I disagree with Scott’s vision of these concepts as purely mythological. Her unsubstantiated claims that recently the duration of the republic relies upon and *has* relied upon an objectification of an oppositional Islam are rhetorically and theoretically satisfying, and yet they offer us no explanation of what allowed the Republic to endure for so long before coming into contact with Islam. Certainly France has had its share of exotic others; certainly few can deny that both liberalism and secularism are ideologically motivated political projects. But the idea, espoused by many of the American scholars who write on the veil, that an unmasking of *laïcité* will always

²⁸ Kselman, *The dechristianisation*, 158.

leave sheer racism in its place strikes me as simplistic. This project examines texts on the basis of their own terms rather than attempt to ‘unmask’ them in search of a hidden racist interior.²⁹

None can deny, however, that racism exists in France and that racism *has* existed in France. No discussion of France’s “Islamaphobia,” or attitude toward Islam, can exist apart from an understanding of the country’s history of Orientalism, of the heritage and pervasiveness of the kind of hegemonically-perpetuated thinking to which Saïd alerted the world in 1978. Ian Almond’s *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (2007) reminds us that the masses and politicians are not the only ones to be accused of a discriminatory mentality—even Foucault, the theorist who indirectly bred the concept of Orientalism, is not spared in this catalog of twentieth century theorists who have in some way been guilty of it. Many of the nine thinkers Almond discusses display what could even be considered a sympathy for Islam, or an identification with it. What links them for his purposes is “[n]ot merely that they seek to re-evaluate many of modernity’s central tenets, but that they invoke an Islamic-Arab Other in doing so.”³⁰ His project then is to examine “the effects and implications of this *use* of Islam not only for the individual projects of the writers involved, but also for Islam itself”—a use which he determines remains a European one. Postmodernity, Almond finds,

²⁹ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) for further discussion and destabilization of the attempt to “unmask” secularism and liberalism. Henceforth “Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.”

³⁰ Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007), 2. Henceforth “Almond, *The New Orientalists*.”

inherits the Orientalist tropes of its modern predecessor; it simply expresses them in subtler ways.³¹

But according to Almond, postmodernists are mostly interested in discussing and analyzing a social Islam; “the status of Islam as a transcendental belief-system—no different metaphysically from that of Christianity or Judaism—appears to be a fact forgotten by sympathetic commentators in their eagerness to recruit the *tout autre* of modernity in their own struggles against it.”³² Here I disagree. Granted, Almond’s book was released soon after the publication of *This Incredible Need*, and consequently his chapter devoted to Kristeva’s form of Orientalism does not deal with that particular text, but Kristeva and others, such as Fethi Benslama, *are* in fact analyzing the status of Islam as a transcendental belief-system; each interrogates its foundational theological structure.

But neither our brief genealogy of *laïcité* nor Almond’s insights into the Orientalism of postmodernity speak directly to a major element of Kristeva’s work, one that remains unexplained: the psychoanalytic element. For many Americans, not only is it unbelievable that someone could publish such things about Islam and receive praise—it is hard to believe that someone could publish, without a hint of irony or fear of cultural rejection, a book in 2006 whose entire premise hinges on the Freudian death drive and religious oedipal complex. And yet Kristeva does not exist in a vacuum: Fethi Benslama’s *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* (2003) attempts to psychoanalyze Muslim theology; Moutapha Safouan’s *Why the Arabs are Not Free* (2007) takes a Lacanian approach to the investigation of writing and power

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 196.

in its examination of Arab despotism, while Bruno Étienne's *Les Combattants Suicidaires* (2005) takes a psychoanalytic approach in treating specifically fundamentalist Islam. These texts, all written in French by scholars living in France,³³ are just a few examples of several that have been published within the past ten to fifteen years that operate with similar psychoanalytical approaches to Islam.³⁴

This, to my mind, is a phenomenon worth interrogating at length—perhaps a phenomenon best understood if one comprehends Freud's continuing French popularity, a feature largely unremarked upon in current scholarship. This flourishing of Freudian analysis can be traced back to the 1950s and 60s, when the French intelligentsia convened around the writings and lectures of Jacques Lacan, forming societies whose missions ranged from those that aimed to revitalize Freud to those that wanted to steer his legacy in new directions. "By the time of Lacan's death," according to historian Élisabeth Roudinesco,

France had become Freudian through its Left, its literature, its Communism, and its gauchisme. At the same time, it had become Lacanian...Lacanianism had thus won its battle for an implantation of Freudianism in France."³⁵ By 1986, "Freudian doctrine [was] flourishing within the nation's boundaries."³⁶

³³ I should note, however, that though these scholars are writing in French and living in France, the three whose texts this thesis goes on to analyze each originally hail from a country other than France: Élisabeth Roudinesco is originally from Romania, Julia Kristeva, from Bulgaria, and Fethi Benslama, from Tunisia.

³⁴ For examples of other such texts that I do not go on to explore here, see the works of Adnan Houballah (Lebanese), Khatibi (Moroccan), and Tarabishi (Syrian) (to name the most prominent). All of these authors are male, living in France, and writing in French (with the exception of Tarabishi, who is the only one who writes in Arabic about Arab intellectuals and Arabic literature), about Islam and psychoanalysis in the context of the rise of Islamism, "the context of which" as Joseph Massad comments, "seems to have triggered their interventions." (See Joseph A. Massad, "Psychoanalysis, Islam, & The Other of Liberalism", *Umbria: A Journal of the Unconscious* 2009, 46.)

³⁵ Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 682.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 683.

Douglas Kirsner's *Psychoanalysis and its Discontents* (2004) would suggest that such flourishing has not ceased. He offers a statistically-based examination of the popularity of psychoanalysis in countries such as France and Argentina compared to its lack of popularity in the United States and United Kingdom. "As reported in Time Magazine (Grossman, 2003), there are currently only 5,000 patients in psychoanalysis in the United States with members of the American Psychoanalytic Association. This means there are fewer than two analysands per member of the American Psychoanalytic Association,"³⁷ a figure that he notes is declining as the current mean age of members in this organization is 62 and rising. Meanwhile, in France, there are about 5,000 French psychoanalysts across a wide range of schools and organizations; there exist about 86 French psychoanalysts per million French people.³⁸ Kirsner asserts that Paris is the site of "many Lacanian groups...and also where psychoanalysis is part of the culture that continues to be widely discussed, from television to universities to hospitals to clinics,"³⁹ thus widening the influence of psychoanalytic ideas in French culture. Roudinesco explains the phenomenon in her own book, *Why Psychoanalysis*:

...it should not be forgotten that France is the only country in the world where, for a whole century, the necessary conditions came together for a successful integration of psychoanalysis into every sector of cultural life, via both psychiatric and intellectual routes.⁴⁰

"In this regard," she tells us, "France is an exception."⁴¹

³⁷ Douglas Kirsner, "Psychoanalysis and its Discontents", *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Volume 21, Issue 3, Summer 2004, 339. Henceforth "Kirsner, *Psychoanalysis*."

³⁸ *Ibid*, 343.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Why Psychoanalysis?*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Henceforth "Roudinesco, *Why Psychoanalysis?*".

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

In France, then, psychoanalysis is not limited to the couch—nor is it limited to universities and hospitals. In fact, the network of psychoanalytic intelligentsia influences the production of public opinion in a way that is particularly French. As anthropologist John Bowen explains, “the mechanisms of promotion and review in France help to explain a phenomenon that everyone denounces but in which everyone participates: *la pensée unique*, a singular way of thinking.”⁴² What this means, he argues, is that “intellectual writings provide relatively well-organized versions of orientations that one finds in popular writings, television programs, and political speeches.”⁴³ Public intellectuals, politicians, television figures, and writers about public affairs, Bowen tells us, are much more likely to read one another’s work, be related to one another, “or indeed be the same person” in France than they are in other countries.⁴⁴ Interpolating forces such as desire for promotion, positive review, and funding create a web of singular thinking; for public figures and intellectuals to combat such thinking means jeopardizing possibilities for career advancement and societal validation.

This French *pensée unique* renders the phenomenon of psychoanalyzing Islam all the more interesting, and all the more urgently begging for analysis of its own. For while Fethi Benslama’s analysis of the Freudian implication of various Quranic scenes may strike an American as esoteric, the import of that analysis is more relevant to popular French opinion—to a dominant and powerful *pensée unique*—than that of any American intellectual would be to popular American culture.

⁴² Bowen, *Why the French*, 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

This thesis will examine this contemporary French trend of psychoanalyzing Islam. This project does *not* endeavor to make claims about Islam itself. Rather, it make claims about a psychoanalytic discourse on Islam—a discourse that produces a certain *representation* of Islam. Like Edward Saïd, I do not believe that Islam has some ‘true essence’ that is wrongfully distorted by this representation, but I do believe that texts—whether scholarly or literary—should not be assumed to be politically innocent.⁴⁵ In considering this treatment of Islam and its implications, I am informed by Talal Asad’s assertions about religion and religious scholarship. In his essay, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” Asad is skeptical of Clifford Geertz’s oft-cited and influential five part definition of religion; he declares the defining of a “universal religion” to be an impossible task. What Asad classifies as Geertz’s search for an autonomous essence of religion, as though religion could be somehow both transhistorical and transcultural, serves as a starting point for Asad’s examination of “the ways in which the theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power.”⁴⁶ Asad explicates the intellectual trajectory of this quest to define religion, and in demonstrating that this quest is itself the product of a particular cultural moment and place, he proves its lack of applicability to *every* religion at *every* historical moment. Asad walks us through the Western narrative that breeds a Geertz, demonstrating the shifts in power and knowledge, and the reigning ideologies about religion that begin during the Enlightenment, trickle down to Marx, and eventually bring us to the

⁴⁵ Edward Saïd, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1979), 273. Henceforth “Saïd, *Orientalism*.”

⁴⁶ Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29. Henceforth “Asad, *The Construction*.”

eminent symbolic anthropologist. Asad views this current trend of abstracting and universalizing religion (as exemplified by Geertz) as a manifestation of a larger “change in the modern landscape of power and knowledge,”⁴⁷ which has affected our notions of science, subjectivity, and the state, in addition to religion. In this way religion is no different than these secular phenomena from which Geertz attempts to distinguish it: each is conditioned by the coalescing of cultural and social forces, and the patterns of religious moods and motivations that Geertz attempts to isolate, do not, in fact, exist in a vacuum.

It is this attempt to isolate religion that Asad finds so problematic about Geertz’s study of it: the notion that somehow religion is not produced by and producing the knowledge and power structures of the “real world,” that it operates solely on the level of the symbolic. Asad is disturbed by this removal of spatial and temporal context, asking, “if religious symbols are understood...as vehicles for meaning, can such meanings be established independently of the form of life in which they are used?”⁴⁸ This is the same concern I have when I consider the recently written texts like Kristeva’s that refer to Islam as some sort of monolithic totality, blind to the variety in its cultural, national and even individual iterations.

I am inclined to agree with Asad that one cannot make claims about a pan-religion; any study that does so necessarily fails to rigorously capture religious reality, which must be site-, culture-, and history-specific. Religion, like other social, economic and political forces, is both produced by humans and contributes to our production as subjects. To discount it from the web of interconnected forces involved

⁴⁷ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 53.

in this process of production on the basis of its “symbolic nature” strikes me as a reductionist and condescending way of viewing religion. Yet psychoanalysis is born of the same secularist narrative that sparked the two-dimensional concept of religion as a double-layering of the symbolic and the real: Freud takes up the theorizing of religion and religious people with the caveat that it is a neurosis; his motivations are explicitly secular, his contempt for religious “illusion” practically drips off the page when the topic turns to God. At the end of *The Future of an Illusion*, he famously proposes an orderly, reasonable and scientific “God of logos,” as men must move on from their irrational God—after all, they cannot remain children forever.

To take up an Asad-ian perspective, it cannot be discounted that psychoanalysis is the product of a particular narrative, a narrative that makes claims about religion and the human reliance upon it. But does this mean that any attempt to psychoanalyze religion is doomed to two-dimensionality, to a shallow engagement from the start? As I undertake this thesis then, I do so with several underlying questions: what do we make of the cultural phenomenon of psychoanalyzing Islam? Is there something inherently reductionist about viewing religion psychoanalytically? Is it necessarily a means of othering that leaves no space for the religion itself? Or can we think productively about religion using psychoanalysis in a way that does not strip the religious substance of its content, that does not chalk up entire communities, beliefs, and lifestyles to mere symbolism?

I take a Derridean deconstructionist approach to this question, reconstructing psychoanalytic arguments about Islam on their own terms before deconstructing their oppositional binaries and exposing the violent hierarchies that structure these

binaries. Chapter One engages with theories about masculine aggression in Islam, focusing on Kristeva and Benslama's respective theories about incomplete Freudian Oedipal complexes at the root of Islam's theology. I reconstruct, analyze, and compare what each theorist sees as the consequences of the complex they set forth, noting that Kristeva's hypotheses about aggressive adolescents are more problematic and rely on more generalizations than Benslama's careful distinction between fundamentalist Islam and the rest of practicing Muslims.

Chapter Two explores what is perhaps even more contested in France today than the image of the male Muslim terrorist—that of the Muslim female, forced to cover herself in public. With the ever-present discourse that surrounds the veil controversy in mind, I approach the psychoanalytic theories set forth by Benslama and Roudinesco about the role of the female in Islam. While Benslama's theory centers on the repudiation of Hagar, Roudinesco psychoanalyzes the shameful feelings that she imagines arise for Muslim women in the actual moment of their wearing headscarves in public in France. Finally, I examine Joan Wallach Scott's essay "Sexularism," in which she argues from a psychoanalytic perspective that despite the rhetoric of many pro-veil-ban French politicians, secularism has not resolved the difficulties of sexual difference. This perspective illuminates and complicates the tendency in Benslama and Roudinesco to presume that Islam is problematic for females in a way that "modern" secularism is not.

The final chapter introduces some major concepts of Saïd's *Orientalism*, and drawing on Ian Almond's *The New Orientalists*, I investigate whether a form of Orientalism is at work in the recent texts being published in France that attempt to

psychoanalyze Islam. Working from within *This Incredible Need*, I outline its establishment of an “us” versus “them” binary (in which the “us” is Christian humanism and the “them” is aggressive Islam). Next I examine Roudinesco’s argument in *Le foulard à l’école, étouffoir de l’altérité*, drawing out the opposition between European liberty and Muslim fanaticism that undergirds her text. Finally I approach *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* in order to determine whether Benslama might not, in fact, fall victim to the same binary as Kristeva and Roudinesco despite his conscientious and concerted effort to avoid generalizing or essentializing his subject matter.

But this is not to say that the use of a psychoanalytic framework universally results in a sloppy orientalist viewpoint—nor have I undertaken this project with such an assumption. There exists an undeniable psychological dimension to the veil, to the thinking of those wearing them in France and to the thinking of those banning them, and simply discounting that way of viewing the situation is not the magical solution that will rid us of biases and essentializing generalizations. Such fallacies occur when Freud is not involved, and they occur when he is. What *is* important is the fact that the use of a psychoanalytic lens is still a viable and prevalent form of discourse in France in a way that it is not anywhere else in the world today (except, perhaps, in Argentina).⁴⁹ By examining the invocations of this theoretical framework and its complicated and multifaceted role in the discussion of the political situation

⁴⁹ Lacanian and Kleinian psychoanalysis are extremely popular in Buenos Aires, and as in France, it is disseminated through psychoanalytic practitioners in hospitals and clinics and through teaching in humanities, psychology and psychiatry departments in universities. See Kirsner for further discussion of how psychoanalysis became culturally prevalent in Argentina. However, to my knowledge, no texts have emerged from Argentina that attempt to psychoanalyze an entire religion or culture.

surrounding Islam and the French conception of *laïcité*, I hope to engender an understanding of a French mentality—a deep understanding that achieves more than a mere accusation of racist thinking, even if our ultimate conclusion is that racism is at work. Equally important, I hope to demonstrate the presence and power that psychoanalytic modes of thinking continue to hold in France—thinking not just about an individual patient, but about a collective, a religion, and a civilization. Perhaps an appreciation of this dimension of the discussion will pave the way for a new and deeper conception of the issues surrounding Islam in France today—one that allows us not only to engage with Islam more deeply than through the doling out of music recommendations to “Allah’s madmen,” but also helps us to comprehend where such preposterous Mozart recommendations come from in the first place.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FATHER COMPLEX: THEORIZING ON THE PATERNAL IN ISLAM

This chapter will undertake an analysis of the arguments and theories set forth in Kristeva's *This Incredible Need to Believe* and Benslama's *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, analyzing in turn each of their arguments about the nuanced Freudian father complex at work in Islam and what sort of consequences these perceived complexes ostensibly have for modern day aggression from Muslims and potential fundamentalism. Before delving into these theories however, it will be useful to briefly discuss their inspiration: Freud on religion.

FREUD'S LEGACY: THE MUSINGS OF A JEWISH ATHEIST ON RELIGION

There are many curious aspects of Freud's relationship with religion, about which much has been written—and yet, to my mind, it is even more curious that Freud's theories on religion are being taken up again in the early twenty-first century, sometimes in ways that are more sympathetic toward religion and its believers than Freud himself was. Though born to a Jewish family, “historically and biographically there can be no doubt that Freud was an atheist from his student years. He was an atheist long before he became a psychoanalyst,”⁵⁰ writes Hans Küng in *Freud and the Problem of God*. “Consequently Freud's atheism was not grounded in his psychoanalysis, but preceded it. This too is what Freud constantly maintained, that psychoanalysis does not necessarily lead to atheism.”⁵¹ And yet it is difficult to

⁵⁰ Hans Küng, *Freud and the Problem of God*, trans. Edward Quinn, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 75. Henceforth “Küng, *Freud and the Problem*.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

discount the effect of Freud's atheism on his psychoanalytic theories—this, after all, is the same man who wrote an essay comparing religion to an “obsessional neurosis,”⁵² and a book that dubbed religion an infantile stage that we must shed in pursuit of science, rationality—in other words, of maturity.⁵³ “Both for the individual human being and for mankind as a whole, religion is a pubertal, transitional phase of human development,” Küng explains, summarizing Freud's view. “Neither as an individual nor as a species can man remain a child forever. He must grow up...”⁵⁴

It is clear that Freud's thoughts on religion, which emerge in various sources prior to the development of much of his psychoanalytic theory, derive from those of his great predecessors, Feuerbach and Marx. Freud himself admits that he changed little of Feuerbach's projection theory of religion⁵⁵, only adding to it more psychological depth. But Freud's own trajectory of Feuerbachian atheism does not necessarily render his entire corpus hostile toward religion and the possibility of religion's truth. Hans Küng explains this deftly:

Freud's atheism, of which he was quite certain long before any of his psychological discoveries, thus turns out to be a pure hypothesis, an unproved postulate, a dogmatic claim. And at bottom Freud was well aware of this. For religious ideas, though incredible, are for him also irrefutable. In principle they might also be true. Even for him, what has to be said of their psychological nature by no means decides their truth content and truth value.⁵⁶

⁵² Here I refer to his 1907 essay, *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*, the first publication in which Freud draws the connection between obsessional neuroses and religion. See Sigmund Freud, “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism, and Other Works*, trans. under the editorship of James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson, (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

⁵³ Here I refer to Freud's 1927 book, *The Future of an Illusion*.

⁵⁴ Küng, *Freud and the Problem*, 46.

⁵⁵ Recall the famous phrase “The secret of theology is anthropology” from Feuerbach's “The Essence of Christianity,” in which his projection theory is detailed.

⁵⁶ Küng, *Freud and the Problem*, 80.

Thus, though it may strike us as strange, many of those who have taken up the Freudian psychoanalysis of Islam have done so not necessarily as atheists (though many of these theorists are self-avowedly secular), but as sympathetic onlookers who believe in the positive power of religion—so long as it is a religion whose drives are appropriately sublimated into culture and society.

But even with the question of Freud’s atheism settled, the choice to use the psychoanalyst’s theories to examine Islam remains a fascinating one because Freud himself only ever referred to Islam in a single paragraph. The few sentences can be found in the last book he ever wrote on religion, *Moses and Monotheism* (1938). The psychoanalyst did not claim to be an expert on the topic; in fact, to the contrary, his statements are qualified with the admission that he “[had] not the expert knowledge necessary to complete the investigation.”⁵⁷ Still, the lack of confidence in his expertise did not stop Freud from hypothesizing briefly on the monotheistic tradition least familiar to him, as he goes on to say,

This limited knowledge will allow me perhaps to add that, the founding of the Mohammedan religion seems to me to be an abbreviated repetition of the Jewish one, in imitation of which it made its appearance. There is reason to believe that the Prophet originally intended to accept the Jewish religion in full for himself and his people. The regaining of the one great primeval Father produced in the Arabs an extraordinary advance in self-confidence which led them to great worldly successes, but which, it is true, exhausted itself in these. Allah proved himself to be much more grateful to his chosen people than Jahve had in his time. The inner development of the new religion, however, soon came to a standstill, perhaps because it lacked the profundity which in the Jewish religion resulted from the murder of its founder.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones, (New York: Vintage Books, 1939), 117. Henceforth “Freud, *Moses*.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 117-118.

From this statement, we can extract a few elements of Freud's general beliefs about Islam: first, that he sees it as a repetition and lesser imitation of Judaism. Second, that Islam blossomed for a time, (this, from the "extraordinary advance in self-confidence which led them to great worldly successes,") before "[exhausting] itself," and developmentally coming "to a standstill." Freud goes on to offer one more hypothesis about why this developmental stasis occurred in Islam: because it, unlike the Jewish religion, did not feature the murder of its founder, thus resulting in a lack of "profundity."

This final comment may seem outrageous to the uninitiated Freud reader; but within the context of *Moses and Monotheism*, the statement makes more sense. In this final work of Freud's, which combined three essays and was published in 1939, on the eve of both the Holocaust and Freud's own death, Freud applied psychoanalytic theory to history, offering conjectures about the origins of the Jewish people. The claims he made were scandalous, and to both readers of his time and many contemporary readers, outright outrageous: Moses, he hypothesizes, was not actually Jewish, but born into Ancient Egyptian nobility and a follower of pharaoh Akhenaten, the first ancient Egyptian monotheist, and the Israelites murdered Moses in the wilderness. Freud himself provided a succinct summary of his brewing theory in a 1935 letter to friend and fellow psychoanalyst, Lou Andreas-Salomé.

It [his, at this point, as yet unpublished book] started out from the question as to what has really created the particular character of the Jew, and came to the conclusion that the Jew is the creation of the man Moses...Moses was not a Jew, but a well-born Egyptian, a high official, a priest, perhaps a prince of the royal dynasty, and a zealous supporter of the monotheistic faith, which

the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV had made the dominant religion round about 1350 BC.⁵⁹

In many ways, Freud's argument undermines several major tenets of Judaism, chief among them that Jews are the chosen people. "What the Jews later boasted of their God Jahve, that he had made them his Chosen People and delivered them from Egypt, was literally true—of Moses," Freud claimed. "By this act of choice and the gift of the new religion he created the Jew."⁶⁰

What the publication of this final, strange book of Freud's means—for his theories on religion, for the field of psychoanalysis, and for Freud's relationship with his own Judaism—has been a hotly debated subject by Freud scholars, theologians, and philosophers alike. Both this work and the theories presented in *Totem and Taboo* have been widely disproven as historical fact, and are often not even engaged with but dismissed outright as absurdity. "Nowhere did Freud find less support than for his views on ethnology and the history of religion,"⁶¹ Küng explains. René Girard notes that *Totem and Taboo*, particularly, received widespread criticism: "contemporary criticism is almost unanimous in finding unacceptable the theories set forth in *Totem and Taboo*...Everyone seems intent on covering *Totem and Taboo* with obloquy and condemning it to oblivion."⁶² But what was called into question was not the factual historical material, which Freud compiled from reputable researchers—"it was the *interpretation* of the collected material that came under criticism...Above all, the

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Sigmund Freud to Lou-Andreas-Salomé, June 1, 1935*, Letter. Published in Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Küng, *Freud and the Problem*, 66.

⁶² René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Trans. The Johns Hopkins University Press, (London: The Athlone Press: Continuum, 2004), 204.

incorporation of the very heterogeneous material into a preconceived evolutionary scheme was called into question.”⁶³ But though his less than rigorous use of factual material and his slippage from conjecture into conclusion (which some have chalked up to rhetorical turns-of-hand)⁶⁴ have come under fire, the underlying theme for Freud in his work on religion was always the psychoanalytic—the historical element was merely his means of proving his pre-existing theory, which, in all of his works on religion, always returns to the Oedipus complex. “The murder of the prophet in monotheistic religion corresponds to the murder of the primordial father in totemism and the murder of the Son of God in Christianity,” Küng explains, “all consequences of the Oedipus complex.”⁶⁵

It is this Oedipus complex that we find echoes of in the works of Kristeva and Benslama, who search for a central father figure in Islam to serve as a foothold for their own analyses of the religion. The basic Oedipal religious theory, as developed in *The Future of an Illusion*, goes essentially as follows: man’s initial relationship toward nature resembles the infantile prototype, in which every boy grows up to symbolically kill his father, marry his mother, and then internalize his father, whose prohibitions come to constitute the superego. Why does this pattern occur? Because, Freud says, when faced with remote impersonal forces and destinies, we find ourselves in a state of helplessness analogous to the one we feel as children. Our response, according to the psychoanalyst, is to supply these forces of nature with the characteristics of a parent—specifically, of a father. “If elements have passions etc.

⁶³ Küng *Freud and the Problem*, 67, my emphasis.

⁶⁴ See Bernstein’s analysis in chapter one of *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*.

⁶⁵ Küng, *Freud and the Problem*, 52.

like our own...we can breathe freely, can feel at home in the uncanny and can deal by psychological means with our senseless anxiety,”⁶⁶ Freud reasons. Especially with the onset of monotheism, a religious form that Freud’s tone in *Moses and Monotheism* would suggest that he values highly over the polytheism of “primitive people,” God becomes a single person, thus allowing man’s relations with him to recover the intimacy and intensity of a child’s relation to his father. The Jews in particular fashioned themselves as God’s “only beloved child, the Chosen people.”⁶⁷

But humanity’s relationship with its God is no less ambivalent and tumultuous than man’s relationship with his Oedipal father. A father, while a loving figure the child strives to imitate and obey, also always constitutes a danger: as the child has previously chosen his mother as a love-object, the father’s relationship with the mother will always be perceived as threatening. Thus, the child fears his father no less than he longs for and admires him. Freud’s Father-God is no different: man “creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection.”⁶⁸ We adhere to the prohibitions we impose upon ourselves, projecting them into the anthropomorphic paternal force we call a God. But religion, for Freud, is not a proper enactment of the Oedipal complex. Something goes awry in the process. Freud witnessed what he dubbed obsessional neuroses in some patients; the ego has to invent neurotic rituals to monitor the id, and the neurotic performs these rituals, adhering to the prohibitions “religiously.” This symptom pattern, he claimed, is analogous to that of the religious person, who also

⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961), 20.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 29.

invents neurotic rituals rooted in an unconscious drive and adheres strictly to prohibitions. Just as Freud's neurotic patients needed curing, Freud felt that we, collectively, societally, ought to grow out of religion, that we ought to seek other modes of instinctual repression and other sources for the mandates and prohibitions of our morality. This sentiment creeps into almost every text he wrote on religion, including his final one. "If one attempts to assign to religion its place in man's evolution," he remarked in 1932 in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, "it seems not so much to be a lasting acquisition, as a parallel to the neurosis which the civilized individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity."⁶⁹ Even more scathing are his words in *Civilization and its Discontents*: "The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life."⁷⁰

So can such a legacy of theories on religion possibly help us—not to dismiss religion—but to further understand it today? Cultural theorist Edward Saïd and psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose expressed differing opinions in 2003, when Rose offered a response to Saïd's lecture at the Freud Museum entitled "Freud and the Non-European." Though Saïd refers to *Moses and Monotheism* negatively as "late work," revelatory of its author's aging and stubbornness, he also wrests from it ideas that he thinks are capable of speaking to us in modern times. Freud's major move in *Moses and Monotheism*, as Saïd sees it, is to undercut Jewish originality:

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1933), 230.

⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961), 39.

circumcision was not a Hebraic, but an Egyptian idea, he claims; the Levites, the quintessential Jewish tribe, were in fact just Moses's Egyptian followers who joined him in the new tribe he created. Moses himself, a symbol and figure for the Jewish people, is different than them—he is *Egyptian*. Saïd takes this message, and historical facticity aside, claims that Freud's theory reveals the inherent limits of any communal identity. "Freud's symbol of these limits was that the founder of Jewish identity was himself a non-European Egyptian,"⁷¹ he explains.

In other words, identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without the radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed, because Moses was Egyptian, and therefore always outside the identity inside which so many have stood, and suffered—and later, perhaps, even triumphed.⁷²

What Saïd is implying here exactly—about the current situation in Israel, about the othering inherently involved in the process of identity formation—is perhaps less relevant to this project than is his general advocacy for the strength in Freud's thought on religion, even in its craziest of forms, in *Moses and Monotheism*. These theories, Eurocentric though they may be (and Saïd admits that they *certainly* are), continue to be potentially useful and powerful today in that they "can be articulated in and speak to other besieged identities as well."⁷³ It would seem then that Saïd would support the endeavors of the many theorists analyzing Islam in France, as he closes with the conclusion that "the condition [Freud] takes such pains to elucidate is actually more general in the non-European world than he suspected."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Edward W. Saïd, *Freud and the Non-European*, (London: Freud Museum, 2003), 54.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

Eminent British academic Jacqueline Rose, some of whose work explores the relationship between psychoanalysis, literature, and feminism, does not agree entirely with this reading of *Moses and Monotheism*, but she too thinks there is insight to be gleaned from Freud on religion. She notes that both *Moses* and *Totem & Taboo* offer the thesis that an act of murder is constitutive of the social tie,⁷⁵ as indeed, the central hypothesis of *Totem & Taboo* is that a primitive horde collectively murdered an omnipotent father—a crime that would found the totemic clan, morality, and religion. “You can reject the flawed historical argument of both these texts while accepting the underlying thesis that there is no sociality without violence,” Rose claims, “that people are most powerfully and effectively united by what they agree to hate.”⁷⁶ People are bound to each other and to their God, because like the symbolic father, they have killed him. According to Freud, it is the guilt of this repressed murder—a guilt whose source is never successfully and fully repressed, but always precariously lurking, even generations after the murder has taken place—that underpins an entire communal identity.

As we go on to explore the theories of those who are currently attempting to wrest Freud from his time and into our own, hoping he can rescue us from a moment of crisis, this debate between Saïd and Rose lingers in the background. Do we agree with Saïd, that Freud can speak to besieged non-European identities? Do the recent publications in France prove that he was right in his hope that his outdated or even unproved theory could still speak to us—and not just to ‘us’ but to the ‘Other’—in our time? Or do we find ourselves agreeing with Rose that Freud’s message on

⁷⁵ Ibid, 75.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

religion is a more pessimistic one, agreeing that social and religious ties necessarily originate in violence? Do these Freudian texts on religion, the most recent now over half a century old, still apply today in a way that leads to productive and rigorous thinking? And can they help us in our understanding of one illusion Freud barely touched—the illusion called Islam?

KRISTEVA: FROM ADOLESCENCE TO FUNDAMENTALISM

Julia Kristeva's volume *This Incredible Need*, compiled of various essays, lectures and interviews centered around similar themes, opens with her claim that faith is analyzable. According to Kristeva, this is thanks to Freud: it was his invention of the unconscious that rehabilitated (perhaps unbeknownst to the Viennese doctor himself, Kristeva admits) the authority of inner experience, and thus it "is the Freudian discovery of the unconscious and the founding of psychoanalysis that still guides [Kristeva's] thought."⁷⁷ She acknowledges Freud's generally negative feelings toward religion, and yet yearns to extract a more positive reading on religion from the depths of Freud's corpus. She claims that though a "reductionist" reading of *The Future of an Illusion* would "[allow] us to think that Freud reduced belief to an illusion,"⁷⁸ one must realize that psychoanalysis itself in fact *relies* on belief. Though she admits that Freud would not have authorized or accepted such a description of his work, she grabs hold of the moments in which he acknowledges belief, i.e. the 'God of Logos' he proposes at the end of *The Future of an Illusion*, or his description of "the oceanic feeling," never experienced by the author, but nonetheless acknowledged

⁷⁷ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

in *Civilization and its Discontents* as a common human sensation. Freud attempts to paint a second-hand picture of this feeling, which Kristeva describes as “belief, not in the sense of a supposition, but in the strong sense of an unshakable certainty, sensory plenitude, and ultimate truth the subject experiences as an exorbitant kind of more-than-life, indistinctly sensory and mental, strictly speaking ek-static.”⁷⁹ This feeling, caused by a union of the ego with the surrounding world, manifests itself in absolute certainty and simultaneous loss of self in this intimate connection with our overwhelming surroundings. For Kristeva, this pre- and trans-linguistic experience, as outlined by Freud, is in and of itself support for belief as a worthy object of examination. In having elucidated this feeling, “paradoxically, necessarily, it is a Jewish atheist, Sigmund Freud,” Kristeva insists, “who, trying to plumb the depths of the unconscious, made of the ‘need to believe’ an object of knowledge.”⁸⁰

Kristeva maps this ‘oceanic feeling’, which she calls the pre-religious ‘need to believe’, onto a pre-linguistic and pre-Oedipal father complex. This pre-Oedipal father embodies the qualities of both parents, appearing “on the horizon of ‘the oceanic feeling’” as a kind of life raft, “an imaginary Surface who, through his loving authority, takes me [the pre-linguistic child] from the engulfing container: he is the guarantor of my being.”⁸¹ Before the Oedipal father came along, formulating his laws and prohibitions, this earlier father presented himself as a third person who is realized through the discourse of the mother, to whom the child still belongs and is inseparable, loving the father.⁸² For Kristeva, we acquire language as this process of

⁷⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 4.

⁸¹ Ibid, 10.

⁸² Ibid, xi.

mutual recognition occurs between father and child: the child feels recognized by this third party, by the father loving the mother who is also loved by her, and in turn, the child grants this father recognition. All the while, the child's "babble [turns] into linguistic signs whose value [the father] establishes."⁸³ The father's loving acknowledgment of the child signals the end of the terror and tyranny that threatened the premature newborn and ushers in the initiation of language, and of culture.⁸⁴ Thus the father "confers upon the ego the jubilant certainty of belonging to the world," the omnipotent feeling of being a part of something.⁸⁵ The pre-linguistic era of the overwhelming sensory experience of osmosis with a world as yet undistinguished from subject comes to a close as the child recognizes the father and begins to gradually acquire and enter his world of language and culture.

Kristeva asserts that Freud in fact sketches this father in *The Ego and the Id* (1923)—an "imaginary father who, in recognizing me and loving me via my mother, implies that I am not her but other, who makes me believe that I can 'believe.'"⁸⁶ This father, unlike the Oedipal father, is not yet an object vested with the child's need and desire, but instead an object in which the child *believes*: there is belief in the father's representation of the child, in the father's words, and then in the representation of the father the child creates for himself, and gradually, in the child's own words. Thus, as Kristeva puts it simply, "the speaking being is a believing being"⁸⁷: humans must believe in something before they speak it, they must believe in a father, in his system

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 10, 11.

⁸⁶ Ibid, xii.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 1.

of representation, before they use it to represent themselves. In this way, language is tied inextricably to the primordial need to believe.

This need to believe, then, is not merely a need to suppose, but a belief as in a ‘holding true’. And this truth, in turn, is not something that can be logically demonstrated or scientifically proven, but a truth that “totally, fatally subjugates me...[a] truth that keeps me, makes me exist.”⁸⁸ The question becomes how we address this need to believe, this need to hold true—and whether we address it at all. Kristeva refers to the need as “incredible,” she explains, “for it is not a question of making it an absolute, flattering it and using it as a basis for this or that order or hierarchy—neither is it one of ignoring it, at the risk of mutilating the individual capacity to think and create...”⁸⁹ But these are only her prescriptions for how we *ought to* treat the need, not the reality of its current or past treatment. In fact, it becomes clear that the theorist opens and titles her volume with the “need to believe” precisely because she identifies its neglect as the major problem with secular society today. Instead of “reducing it to the historical forms that the history of beliefs confers upon it,” we must “[sublimate] it (as Freud says) into diverse practices and elucidations.”⁹⁰

In this early section of the volume, the impetus for Kristeva’s project is revealed: she is “convinced,” she tells us, “that by taking this prereligious need to believe seriously, we could confront not only religions’ past and present fundamentalist off-course drift but also the dead ends of secularized societies.”⁹¹ Let

⁸⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 11.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 12.

us not forget our context: Kristeva is living and working in France, and this particular conviction of hers was expressed in 2006 during an interview with Carmine Donzelli, at the height of political unrest surrounding the perceived “clash of religions” in the veil controversy, and only one year after the 2005 riots in the *banlieues* of Paris, in which many first and second generation immigrant youths (some Muslim, of course, some not) set fire to cars and lashed out in violence following the triggering event of the electrocution of two *banlieue*-dwelling youths. Kristeva’s dive into Freud’s pre-religious need to believe, her exploration of and consideration of how we are to manage this universally human oceanic feeling, is in direct response to what she refers to as the “fundamentalism” occurring around her. Her perceived landscape is “a culture of death drive,”⁹² of nihilism. Psychoanalysis, in accounting for the need to believe, strikes the analyst as the only solution to France’s current climate of violence. “This experience,” she says, referring to the psychoanalytic exploration of the need to believe, “seems to me to be the only one that can—not save us from a culture psychoanalysis reveals to us is a culture of the death drive, but create a distraction from this drive: delay it, go around it, divert it, fully cognizant of what we do and why.”⁹³

But the sublimations of the need, encouraged by Freud and by psychoanalysis, are no longer a part of the foundation of secular society, Kristeva claims; jurists are forced to create solutions to conflicts, including religious conflicts, and yet such jurists are deprived of the authority that comes from a consensus on moral principles. For “it is precisely this consensus that our multicultural and recomposed societies

⁹² Ibid, xvi.

⁹³ Ibid.

lack, deprived of moral bases because incapable of federating heterogeneous beliefs around mere ‘human rights,’ perceived as ‘abstract.’”⁹⁴ If we read between the lines here, again remembering her context, it seems that Kristeva is unhappy with France’s transition into multiculturalism, which she sees as distancing itself from a consensus on moral principles emanating from human rights. Such “mere” human rights, which she sees as necessary to uphold at the heart of society, are now being “perceived as ‘abstract’”—and note the mocking quotation marks she places around the word abstract. One can imagine that the “human rights” to which she refers, which she maintains should be indisputable principles for the French state and jurisprudence system, are those she sees as threatened by attempts at multiculturalism, such as a female’s “right” to present herself in public unveiled, or her “right” to enter into a marriage that is not polygamous, her “right” not to share her husband with other wives. These examples are merely my projections and hypotheses, but as we will see later, as Kristeva’s work continues, her vague references to this outside environment become more explicitly connected to Islam, allowing one to imagine the newly contested “human rights” in the light of multiculturalism to which she refers. The “challenge” Kristeva perceives in the world, and specifically in her home of France, is that “of different kinds of fundamentalism and the wars of religion, a challenge that [she] choose[s] to define, in a somewhat preemptory manner, as a pressing need to radically reform humanism.”⁹⁵

But then Kristeva’s text takes a turn in the very Freudian direction that she spent the first section attempting to diminish: a turn toward the condescending

⁹⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 2.

treatment of the very “need to believe” that she just so adamantly told us could not be ignored. For while the “need” should not go neglected, Kristeva still associates it with adolescence. “There is no such thing as an adolescent without the need to believe,”⁹⁶ she asserts, revealing the first glimmer of connection we’ve seen thus far in her volume between her own attitude toward belief and religion and that of Freud (lest we need reminding, he dubbed that need “patently infantile”). But adolescence isn’t limited to the young person for Kristeva; “all of us are adolescents when we are passionate about the absolute.”⁹⁷ Here we veer in the direction of a need to believe that is universal, understandable—and yet it still retains the naïveté and stubborn stupidity associated with teenagers. It is above all volatile, as “faith is potentially fundamentalist, like the adolescent. Romeo and Juliet are its blazon.”⁹⁸

So what exactly is the correlation between the adolescent and the need to believe? Kristeva explains that all adolescents are “ill from ideality”:⁹⁹ the adolescent “believes in the existence of the erotic object,”¹⁰⁰ either of love or desire; he searches for this object that he is *certain* exists, not because he knows it scientifically, but because he, the adolescent, is a believer. But, of course, reality does not align with the adolescent’s beliefs, and “since our drives and desires are ambivalent, sadomasochistic, our belief that the *Ideal Object exists* is forever being threatened or even brought up short.”¹⁰¹ This is where the problems arise: the same youthful passion that was involved in the search for the fully-believed in Ideal Object now

⁹⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 14.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

evolves into self-punishment, disappointment, depression, suicide, anorexia, or “should the political context lend itself, the urge to destroy oneself-with-the-others that I’ve called the kamikaze syndrome,”¹⁰² Kristeva notes, jumping rapidly into a description of what is almost certainly violent religious fundamentalism, here left somewhat ambiguous at the end of a laundry list of adolescent ailments.

But this ideality is always painful and harmful, because the adolescent believes in something impossible, and will thus always be let down. “In effect, during adolescence we idealize the parent-couple while wishing to remake it, only much better,” thus “we cut ourselves off from it so we can replace it with a new model, promise of absolute satisfaction.”¹⁰³ The ego’s overflowing narcissism and ideals are all poured into and projected onto the sought-after love object. This new connection between the ego and the love object “goes hand in hand with the belief of being invested with the duty and the power to surpass the parental couple, and even to abolish it, so as to escape it into an idealized, paradisiacal variant of total satisfaction.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, the adolescent believes in what Kristeva calls the “Great Other”: not only that this “other” exists out there somewhere, but that said other can provide complete satisfaction. Vested with such a belief, the adolescent will necessarily be disappointed—and with this disappointment comes self-destructive, punitive behavior. “The innocence of the child gives way to necessarily sadomasochistic satisfactions that draw their violence from the very strictures of the ideality syndrome, which command the adolescent: ‘Your pleasure shall have no

¹⁰² Ibid, 15.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

bounds!”¹⁰⁵ It would seem that the “need to believe,” for Kristeva, cannot be neglected—not because belief and faith are positive forces that have been ignored, but because the “need to believe,” it turns out, necessarily leads to disappointment, and the passion of ideality turns to a different, more violent passion: one of sadomasochism.

But Kristeva qualifies this—somewhat: “belief is not itself delirious but has the potential to become so,”¹⁰⁶ she explains. “The drive/ideality amalgam” present in adolescents “comes apart under the increased force of the drives, and this disintegration augments the potential for delirium.”¹⁰⁷ However qualified, and however “potential” she may dub the delirium, Kristeva presents the scenario as fairly causal, with phrases such as “adolescent belief inevitably goes hand in hand with adolescent nihilism.”¹⁰⁸ Enthusiasm and romanticism evolve seemingly necessarily (according to this portrayal) into fanaticism. If the adolescent’s phantasmatic belief in the Love Object fails to be sublimated into something like “school, profession, [a] vocation that balances or replaces the Ideal Object of satisfaction,”¹⁰⁹ then the adolescent falls down the rabbit hole, landing in one of the ailments on Kristeva’s list (“drug addiction”, “anorexic behavior”, “gang rape or vandalism” are among her examples).¹¹⁰ And civilization doesn’t help: it perpetuates the adolescent belief in the ideal with televised representations of happy bourgeois couples, with its underlying currents of Adam and Eve, of Romeo and Juliet. But let us step back from Kristeva

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 16.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 18.

for a moment: can a love of Romeo and Juliet really lead to anorexia? To drug addiction? To suicide bombings? She seems to think—nay, *believe*—yes.

Just as Freud drew the comparison between obsessional neuroses and religions, pointing out the similar “symptoms” and behavioral patterns involved in both phenomena, Kristeva continues to draw out her connection between adolescent ideality and religious fundamentalism:

It is not by chance that adolescent malaise, which is a source of concern for modern society...goes along with a return of the religious, very often in bastardized (sects) or fundamentalist (which in the name of ideals encourage an explosion of the death drive) forms.¹¹¹

The difference between Kristeva’s analogy and that of her predecessor is that Kristeva insists *not only on a similarity but on a causal connection*: the “adolescent malaise” leads to the return of the religious, specifically, religion of the “bastardized” and “fundamentalist” varieties. Kristeva suggests that we latch onto this similarity, to this site of brewing ideality and consequent violence—adolescence could be the key to France’s salvation, an opportunity for us to understand the adolescent need to believe and then “be better able to interpret the variants of this new malaise of civilization that surrounds us and is expressed by the return of the ‘need to believe.’”¹¹² The need to believe, which Kristeva originally appeared to defend so passionately against Freudian accusations of “illusion,” is now written off as something negative after all, as something that sounds quite similar to Freud’s description of religious belief as the “malaise of civilization.”

¹¹¹ Ibid, 21.

¹¹² Ibid.

Kristeva's thesis is her call for the answer to this malaise, for a new reformed humanism capable of properly sublimating the pre-religious need to believe that has wreaked so much havoc on the world. Her tone is full of urgency; the world in which she writes is one of "destructive confrontations where regression and the explosion of the death instinct face off, the present danger to global humanity."¹¹³ But this is no simple "clash of religions"—that, according to Kristeva, "is but a surface phenomenon."¹¹⁴ The real problem 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."¹¹⁵ The secular theorist who claims to respect and understand belief and faith has now fallen deeper into Freudian condescension toward her religious subject matter: she may respect those who believe that "God is unconscious," but those who believe "He exists," seem to be, in her view, delusional. This is no clash of religions, but a clash of those who have managed their religious belief, relegating it to the realm of inner subjectivity ("the unconscious"), and those who are "enjoying the show" that believes in a God external to the individual psyche. The former type of belief, one might note, neatly fits within France's conception of *laïcité*, while the latter is public, and deemed showy by Kristeva.

So where does Islam fit into this schema, into this diagnosis of society's failures and this call for something new to fix them? We may have already picked up on several of the indirect references to the religion, lurking in the shadows of words

¹¹³ Ibid, 64.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 26, 27.

such as “multiculturalism,” “fundamentalism,” “nihilism,” and even “banlieue violence.” Such phrases paint a picture that would not be lost on any French reader, Islam being the second largest religion in France, and certainly the one that has recently posed the most problems for *laïcité*. But the reader need not continue making inferences, as Kristeva goes on to directly respond to interview questions about Islam later in the volume, thus explicitly elucidating her earlier allusions.

One interview question is itself eyebrow-raising: “Does Islam share in this trend of monotheism?” she is asked, “Where does its warlike spirit come from? Might Allah be closer to the God of Aristotle than God the Creator?”¹¹⁶ At first Kristeva appears to proceed cautiously, citing a hope to avoid aggravating “misunderstandings.”¹¹⁷ But as she goes on, she does just that; as Mary-Jane Rubenstein points out in her book review, Kristeva fails to criticize both the form of the question and the assumptions carried within it—instead, she affirms them.¹¹⁸ “You are correct,” she tells her interviewer, “many specialist [*sic.*] speak of the ‘resemblances’ between Allah and the God of Aristotle...:some would place him at ‘the source’ of Islamic radicalization, right to robotlike obedience and terror!”¹¹⁹ But lest we conflate these Gods too quickly, Kristeva goes on to remind us—not of Islam’s complexity, but of Aristotle’s. “Let us remember, at least that the Aristotelian divine is much more complex than people would have it. Already, in the *Metaphysics*, this prime mover moves the sublunary world like a desirable ‘love object’

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 64.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 65.

¹¹⁸ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, review of *This Incredible Need to Believe*, by Julia Kristeva, *Modern Theology*, October 1, 2010, Volume 26, Issue 4, 666. Henceforth “Rubenstein, review of *This Incredible Need*.”

¹¹⁹ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 65.

(*Metaphysics* λ7),” Kristeva explains, informing us that “in the *Poetics*...Aristotle posits a divinity that does not harden into unapproachable theocracy, but engenders a tragic humanism.”¹²⁰ Such a soft, loving, unhardened God apparently contrasts with Allah: “We are very far, as we see, from the omnipotence of the Islamic legislator who exacts obedience,” and although the God of Aristotle is not as high on Kristeva’s hierarchy as the Christian God, he earns the esteem of the author because he is incorporated into the concept of the “living and loving” Christian God.¹²¹ It is clear how this hierarchy shapes out: the loving Christian God at the top, next the God of Aristotle, and somewhere in the depths of unloving hardness we find Allah.

Of course, Kristeva has a psychoanalytic explanation to justify her clear preference, and it centers around none other than the father. Quoting from Freud’s single paragraph on Islam in *Moses and Monotheism*, she explains his suggestion that “the Mohammedan religion...lacks the deepening produced, in the case of Judaism, by the murder perpetrated against the religion’s founding figure,’ a murder that Christianity is, on the other hand, ready to admit.”¹²² This, Kristeva tells us, is a view she shares.¹²³ Why? Because “the tortured and beloved Father-Son” we find in

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid, 66. Here Kristeva is citing from *Moses and Monotheism*. See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones, (New York: Vintage Books, 1939). Though Kristeva does not draw from *Totem* in this particular passage, we can understand Freud’s line of argumentation better if we consider the arguments he posits there about Christianity: the sacrifice of Jesus, of the son, is viewed by Freud as a sign of atonement of the collective guilty deed of having once murdered the primeval father. In Christianity, a son-religion thus displaces the father-religion, and ancient rituals such as the totem meal are revived in the form of communion. Freud claims that in rituals such as these we can recognize the effect of the crime “by which men were so deeply weighed down but of which they must nonetheless feel so proud.” See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 217; henceforth “Freud, *Totem*.”

¹²³ Ibid.

Christianity is nowhere to be found in Islam.¹²⁴ There is uncertainty as to the object of the sacrifice in Islam—would the proper son be Ishmael or Isaac, Kristeva asks, failing to cite the Quranic passage that incites this confusion. And even more uncertainty is generated by the fact that in the Quranic version of the son sacrifice story, Abraham dreams of the sacrifice as opposed to receiving a direct order from God while awake, as in Genesis. With such ambiguities surrounding the sacrifice, “the text does indeed avoid ‘going into’ the question of the murder of the originary Father,” a feature Kristeva contrasts with “a more thorough examination of the hate love of and for the father that we find in Christianity.”¹²⁵

In fact, not only is Islam ambiguous about its Father-son sacrifice, but the concept of paternity in the idea of the divine—the one which Freud and Kristeva identify as present in both Jewish and Christian monotheism—is absent in Islam. “Islam cut itself off from” these earlier monotheisms and from “many other vital points of the biblical-Gospel canon having to do with the loving bond between Creator and creatures.”¹²⁶ It is these “certain distinctive features of Islam” that Kristeva so harshly claims “make an Islamic theology improbable if not impossible and, similarly, any ‘discussion’ between Sunnis and Shiites, not to mention with the other two monotheisms.” The impossibilities for Islam continue, as “these distinctive features also handicap a possible opening of Islam toward the ethical and political problems raised by the freedoms... of the men and women of the third millennium and by the different ways of thinking in confrontation on these subjects.”¹²⁷ No longer are

¹²⁴ Ibid, 66, 67.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 67.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 68

we referring only to fundamentalism, or to certain sects of Islam—the Islam in question here is an entire, singular entity, all of which is deemed incapable of facing the ethical and political problems that arise in the third millennium, when people are free. But Kristeva hasn't lost sight of fundamentalism—in fact, she's analyzing it in order to draw inferences about an entire religion: "...the fundamentalist stagnation of Islam raises the more general question about the very structure of *homo religiosus*."¹²⁸

One of the major differences Kristeva identifies as influential and problematic in Islam is the nature of the bond between its central deity and its believers. Kristeva describes this bond as

tantamount to a juridical pact—which is quite different from the bond between a paternal Creator whose role is to *elect* (in Judaism, whose spirit, however legalistic, does not in the least suppress the creationist value that summons God's chosen people to the work of reflection and interrogation) or *to love* (in Christianity, even in the test of abandonment and passion).¹²⁹

Not only is the “loving” element of the God-Father hate/love missing, however—the nature of a “juridical” pact is so void of passion that it doesn't inspire the “hate” element either. Thus, the central ambivalent Father-son structure Freud traced in religion appears to be absent in Islam. Because of this, Kristeva reasons, Islam fails to refine and sublimate suffering and the death drive into culture, in the way that Christianity does so successfully, so “geniusly.” “Indeed, Christianity is the only religion that addresses suffering ‘intimately’—that tames it—and the culture that comes along with it or after it shows the effects of this.”¹³⁰ These predecessor cultures of Christianity that Kristeva praises may in fact be secular: the Enlightenment, humanism, even and especially Freud's invention of psychoanalysis all fall within her

¹²⁸ Ibid, 70.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 68.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 81.

umbrella of modes of thought, art, and culture that can be claimed by a Christian-heritage (and perhaps unfairly, we might add, as the distinction between the Judeo- and Christian- in this genealogy gets blurred and is quickly chalked up to Christianity).

Rubenstein points deftly to the problems with this argument about Islam's inadequate father schema, which is not really an argument, and resembles more closely "a wholesale refusal to recognize the theo-philosophical heritage of Islam."¹³¹

Rubenstein outlines the effects of this:

1) displacing all religiously sanctioned violence onto Muslims, 2) rendering futile any reasoned response to such violence ('they' won't listen anyway, because they can't), and 3) obscuring nearly every one of its causes. One is left believing that the fires in the French *banlieues*, the protests in Denmark, the IEDs in Afghanistan and Iraq have nothing to do with military, historic, political, or economic factors; they are simply the function of a vast Muslim father-complex.¹³²

The solution to the problems generated by this Muslim lack of (or distorted) father-complex, for Kristeva, lies in Christianity. "If Islam can only generate violence," as Rubenstein puts it, "'Christianity's difference' is its ability to sublimate it."¹³³ In renewing our humanism in order to fend off the recent explosions of the death drive, Kristeva tells her reader, we should not forget humanism's specifically Christian heritage. "Unlike Freud, I don't say that religion is merely an illusion and source of neurosis," she tells us, repeating all the distinctions she worked to draw between their attitudes on religion (which, one may note, seems to become conflated with 'belief' quite quickly). In fact, she appears to be arguing for an embrace of religion, so long as it remains within its confines of a kernel of a secular humanism:

¹³¹ Rubenstein, review of *This Incredible Need*, 668.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

The time has come to recognize, without being afraid of ‘scaring off’ either the faithful or the agnostics, that the history of Christianity is a preparation for humanism. Of course, humanism is a state of a rupture with Christianity, but it starts from it: a ‘rupture’ that Christianity heralded in being the only religion that comes within a hair’s breadth of exciting from the domain of the religious, notably—but not only—when it makes God himself suffer to death.¹³⁴

Here the true distinction between Kristeva and Freud becomes clear: unlike Freud, not *all* religion is a source of neurosis for Kristeva—just those religions that do not resemble Christianity in their failure to put their Gods to death.

This fixation on the killing of the God as the proper schema for the sublimation of destructive instincts is interesting, as Kristeva seems to be reading Freud¹³⁵ quite literally in some respects, taking for granted the historical assumptions he relies on to offer his father-murder theory. And yet she neglects several important elements of this theory. Notably, its *negative* effects, the ways in which this father schema does not succeed, but *fails* to adequately manage the instinctual drives of its followers, is referred to nowhere by Kristeva. These negative effects are in many ways Freud’s larger point: that “society was now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse attaching to it, while morality was based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt.”¹³⁶ This central guilt of the pious man is not, in Freud’s reading, a happy, culture-producing phenomenon, but one that resembles

¹³⁴ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 83.

¹³⁵ Specifically, *Totem and Taboo* focuses on the killing of the father as a central trauma at the root of civilization that all future religions reenact out of a filial sense of guilt, while *Moses and Monotheism* outlines and “proves” the historical instance of the Jews’ reenacting this through their murder of Moses.

¹³⁶ Freud, *Totem*, 208.

obvious neuroticism in that this man compulsively enacts rituals without understanding the unconscious guilt that drives him to do so.¹³⁷

But fidelity to Freud is obviously not Kristeva's chief concern; according to her reading, it is only those whose religious structures fail to fit the Freudian father model whose drives will be inadequately sublimated, and will thereby find themselves maladjusted in modern society as something less than cultured, refined human beings. It is finally here in her argument that Kristeva expresses the sentiments on Mozart that we encountered in the introduction: "Christianity refines suffering into joy. Listen to the 'Miserere Nobis' of the Mass in C Minor: the sacrifice resolves itself into serenity, then ecstasy. What an unexpected filiation! Allah's madmen, among others, should give this some thought."¹³⁸ It is this perfect Christian-infused culture that "Allah's madmen" need exposure to, a refinement of suffering that, according to Kristeva, their entire religious tradition lacks. And yet even after statements such as these, Kristeva still maintains that "psychoanalysis neither explains nor judges; it is content to transform."¹³⁹ But if the lines we have heard from her are not judgment, what are they exactly? An invitation for us to *transform* Islam into cultured Christianity? Is this the superpower of the new humanism she envisions?

This "Genius of Catholicism,"¹⁴⁰ its capability to manage the volatile need to believe, to refine adolescent ideality, is what Kristeva considers the "Christian

¹³⁷ For more elaboration on this analogy, see Freud's 1907 essay, *Obsessive Actions & Religious Practices*.

¹³⁸ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 84.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁴⁰ The penultimate section of her volume is in fact given this title.

difference”¹⁴¹ present in today’s conflict of religions. But as “handicapped” as Islam may be in its possibility for dialogue with the other monotheisms, this is for Kristeva,

all the more reason not to throw up our arms before the terrifying, even terroristic, drift of these underlying currents of Islam, but to try to draw upon the most open of them and upon the anthropological, sociological, and even psychoanalytic research today devoted to Islam, before envisaging the eventuality of mutual understanding.¹⁴²

Instead of throwing up our arms, we can take the Christian difference and use it, employing Christianity and its offspring to “transform” today’s situation. This is essentially Kristeva’s conclusion, her final call to arms:

This civilization—from the Christ who inhabits this altar to Mozart whose renown is worldwide—this civilization, ours, today menaced from the outside and by our own inability to interpret and renew it, bequeaths us thus its subtle triumph over human suffering, transformed, without losing sight of the suffering to death of the divine itself. It is incumbent on us to take up this heritage once again, to give it meaning, and to develop it in the face of the current explosions of the death drive.¹⁴³

But one is left wishing that the “subtle triumph over human suffering” bequeathed to us by Christianity would allow Kristeva to slow down and recognize the human suffering of those she conflates with Allah’s madmen, of the masses of Muslims who have been vilified for their resistance to *laïcité*, for their association with terrorism. One wishes, as Rubenstein so aptly puts it, that Kristeva could have the Christian “com-passion” whose praises she sings “to understand Muslim theology, rather than simply declare it impossible.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 88.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 68.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 97.

¹⁴⁴ Rubenstein, review of *This Incredible Need*, 669.

BENSLAMA : VARIATIONS ON THE PATERNAL IN ISLAM

The self-identified secular Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama's project is an interesting one: he asks "what would happen if, a century after Freud, we were to integrate into this vast scaffolding the primal fictions of Islam and the workings of its symbolic systems?"¹⁴⁵ Following Freud's legacy in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, Benslama's book "extends to Islam Freud's project of exposing the repression on which religious institutions are based and undertakes to translate their metaphysics into metapsychology. It takes a psychoanalytic approach to texts and events that have assumed pride of place for this religion..."¹⁴⁶ Benslama sets out to investigate Islam as a psychoanalyst and through psychoanalysis, examining its key texts like the Quran, Hadith, and philosophical commentary.

Like Kristeva, Benslama's project emerged in direct response to what he perceived as events around him deserving urgent attention. "The current reality of Islam forced me...to recognize an extraordinary experience melding the unconscious and politics during a period of accelerated global transformation," he explains; "in the face of the unparalleled drama of events, the day-to-day relevance of Islam demanded a continuous effort of analysis and interpretation."¹⁴⁷ Elsewhere he says that the book is born of a need to "explain ourselves"—ourselves being Muslims—apart from a concept of traditional Islam.¹⁴⁸ This need, while provoked perhaps by the same events that stirred Kristeva, is slightly different for Benslama in that he identifies with the

¹⁴⁵ Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, Trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), vii. Henceforth "Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*."

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, viii.

group that must explain itself: he believes himself to be speaking for Muslims, as opposed to Kristeva, who as we saw, far from speaking *for* them, viewed even speaking *to* them as an impossibility. But though he may identify with Muslims, the need is still “to explain themselves,” as though something is wrong that needs justification—and Benslama does not indicate that this Western demand that Muslims explain themselves is an unreasonable one. His chief goal is not, actually, to explain Islam, but “to identify certain *problems* associated with contemporary Islam and its origins, examining them through the eyes of our universal psychoanalytic knowledge concerning the relationship between psyche and civilization.”¹⁴⁹ This volume, then, is an attempt to address the current problems posed by contemporary Islam through a psychoanalytic investigation of its past—an attempt, like Kristeva’s, in which Freud is at the fore. “Certainly, Freud’s remarks on religion are prudent when discussing issues that directly affect the contemporary crisis of Islam,”¹⁵⁰ he claims.

Guided and inspired by Freud, it is no surprise that Benslama too takes up the issue of the father—or the lack thereof—in Islam. “The idea of a reappropriation of the primal father in the founding of Islam is of great relevance to my investigation,” he explains, referring to Freud’s quote about Islam as an “imitation,” an “abbreviated repetition”¹⁵¹ of the Jewish religion. Benslama is wary of this theory; he notes that it was not unique to Freud, but developed from the annals of European thought on the final monotheism, which cast Islam as imitation in that it had nothing intrinsic to it. Benslama therefore goes on to say,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, viii, my emphasis.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 55.

¹⁵¹ Here I refer again to the only published lines Freud ever penned about Islam, found in *Moses and Monotheism*. See page 31 of this thesis.

I do not view it [Freud's statement on Islam] as the resolution of a problem but as an encouragement to consider the question of the father in Islam in relation to other monotheisms. Therefore, I want to conduct an experiment with Freud, by testing his claim about the Arabs' recapture of the primal father. In what sense was this *Wiedergewinnung* [recapture] possible? How, in borrowing the facilitation of earlier monotheisms, did the founder of Islam reappropriate the primal father? How can we reconcile the reappropriation of the primal father, the mythic figure of unlimited jouissance¹⁵², with the god of monotheistic law?¹⁵³

The author presents several possible answers to his questions: perhaps "Islam misunderstands the symbolic father, in which case the concepts of success, time, and monotheism have no meaning."¹⁵⁴ Or perhaps "the persistence of the primal father is omnipresent in spiritual systems through an ongoing antagonism with the figure of the symbolic father within them, a permanent struggle between the 'obscure god' and the 'sublime god.'"¹⁵⁵ In this way, Islam would be no different than any of the other monotheistic religions; all are constituted by this antagonism between these two types of Gods, obscure and sublime. Benslama goes on to speculate about where we can see this antagonism playing out historically in the different religions, the moments in which one of the two competing figures dominated the other. It is this central tension that, he speculates, "may be the crux of the challenge of monotheistic repetitions, which collide with the impossibility of total symbolization in their originary relationship to the One."¹⁵⁶

But there is another possible explanation for "Freud's difficulty with Islam and his reliance on the solution of the primitive father: namely, contrary to Judaism

¹⁵² Benslama here invokes the Lacanian term '*jouissance*,' which is explained at length in chapter 2 of this thesis. See page 76.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 70.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 70, 71.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

and Christianity, Islam, from its origin, excluded god from the logic of paternity.”¹⁵⁷ Here Benslama reaches the same conclusion we have heard from Kristeva: unlike in the other two monotheistic traditions, there is no central father figure in Islam. But instead of questioning why this is problematic for Islam, as Kristeva does, Benslama thinks about why it was problematic for *Freud* and those attempting to use his theoretical tools: “How can we conceptualize the question of father in a religion in which god is not the father?”¹⁵⁸ he asks. In other words, Freud felt he lacked the expertise to discuss Islam precisely because it was not a father-based religion and thus elided his theoretical grasp.

Slavoj Žižek, in discussing and building on Benslama’s text in his “A Glance into the Archives of Islam,” agrees with Benslama (and Kristeva) that Islam’s God is outside the realm of paternal logic. “Allah is not a father, not even a symbolic one—God is one, he is neither born nor does he give birth to creatures.”¹⁵⁹ One consequence of this is that Islam lacks the domestic familial structure we find in other traditions.

*There is no place for a Holy Family in Islam. This is why Islam emphasizes so much the fact that Muhammed himself was an orphan; this is why, in Islam, God intervenes precisely at the moments of suspension, withdrawal, failure, ‘black-out’ of the paternal function (when the mother or the child are abandoned or ignored by the biological father.)*¹⁶⁰

It is this structure that escapes Freud’s grasp; without an easily identifiable family and father structure, his analysis lacks a foothold. Consequently, “with Islam,” Žižek

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *A Glance into the Archives of Islam, The Antinomies of Tolerant Reason*, lacan.com, 1997/2006, accessed 10 April 2013, <http://www.lacan.com/zizarchives.htm>. Henceforth “Žižek., *A Glance into the Archives.*”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

reasons, “it is no longer possible to ground a community in the mode of *Totem and Taboo*, through the murder of the father and the ensuing guilt as bringing brothers together—thence Islam’s unexpected actuality.”¹⁶¹

And yet as distinct as Islam may be from its predecessor monotheisms in this sense, it also refashions figures and elements from them and is thus far from disconnected to these earlier traditions. Indeed, if Freud is right that Islam involves a reappropriation of the primal father, Benslama conjectures that “it must certainly involve the figure of Abraham, the father that monotheism places at the beginning...of its archive.”¹⁶² Without Abraham’s contribution, he insists, the formulation of Islam would have been impossible. Abraham is central to Islam in three ways: the first is naming; before Islam even came into being, the Qur’an tells us that Abraham named Muhammad “Muslim,” a word which signifies subjection to the God of Abraham. The second way, as outlined by Benslama, is “paternal filiation”: Muhammad identifies Islam as the closure to monotheism, referring in the Qur’an to “the faith of your forbear Abraham’ (22:78).”¹⁶³ Finally, Abraham’s third contribution to Islam comes through what Benslama calls a “ritual inscription” of his near sacrifice of his son. While Kristeva highlighted the (comparatively) less sacrificial attitude in Islam, Benslama points out that in fact

Islam is the only one of the three monotheistic religions to make commemoration of Abraham’s sacrifice a ritual annual obligation, during which every father must sacrifice a ram as a substitute of his son. This element is crucial for the formation of the paternal complex in Islam, because the renunciation of the murder of the son is continuously staged and reenacted.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 72.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

So while there may be no identifiable central paternal figure in Islam, Abraham's role, according to Benslama, still seems to fulfill some of the paternal complex requirements: in ritually reenacting the near sacrifice of Isaac, Islam offers a Freudian sublimation for destructive impulses.

But what, then, according to this theory, is Abraham's connection to the primal father, the one reappropriated from Judaism? Abraham establishes his own spiritual and symbolic order; "the biblical story relates Abraham's moving effort to constitute the antinomic ideal of the primal father and his imaginary omnipotence, concluding in circumcision and the covenant."¹⁶⁵ But Benslama points out that it is in "this very desire to tear himself away from the primal father" through the establishment of his own new order that Abraham in fact transmits the heritage of the primal father. Remember that for Freud, the Jewish connection to this father is not a conscious one, but one that has been repressed and renounced, only to continue to haunt Judaism and the Jewish people, inspiring in them a lingering guilt. Abraham's sacrificial substitution of the ram "establishes the pact of renunciation," thus proving to Benslama that Abraham, like the Jews, is "haunted by the specter of the primal father."¹⁶⁶ It is this haunting that dictates the structure of the new order Abraham sets out to establish.

Yet this is the biblical version of Abraham, and in the transmission from Bible to Qur'an, elements of this story and its figures necessarily change. Benslama highlights the ways in which the figure of Ishmael, named by Muhammad as the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 73.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

father of Islam, can offer more insight into our reading of Abraham and the father configuration. Ishmael's very existence obviously asserts Abraham's status as literal father—but interestingly, episodes with Ishmael also conform to the ambivalent father dynamic we have come to know through Freud. Ishmael, after all, is the abandoned son, banished by his father into the desert where he nearly dies of thirst. Ishmael is given the gift of the promise of nationhood, but Benslama points out that this moment of gift-giving “produces a rupture through which the son is separated from the father who abandoned him.”¹⁶⁷ Yes, Ishmael will be the father of a great nation, but this gift only serves to further separate him from a father who has already abandoned him. Here, Ishmael's story exemplifies Freud's dialectic of “the emotional mechanism” between father and son: in gift and abandonment, in the “conjunction of love and death,” we see the hate-love of the father at work.¹⁶⁸ Muhammad continues this theme, having established Islam as “faith in a god who presented himself originally by embracing the childish voice expressed in the distress of abandonment.”¹⁶⁹ The God who listens to orphaned Muhammad is a God who offers a gift in a moment of abandonment—and abandonment from a father, no less.

Benslama concludes from this analysis that Islam is not, in fact, totally void of the paternal complexes that Freud identifies in other monotheistic traditions, but that there is no *single* father around whom we can conceptualize any schema. Instead, there are several father figures present in the origins of Islam, and “their relation to one another should not be considered linear or fixed but should, rather, be seen as an

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 73, 74.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 74.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

interplay of the transappropriation of the father.”¹⁷⁰ First we have Abraham, a father who establishes himself in opposition to “the tyrannical and murderous figure of the primal father,” but through his very renunciation of this primal father, allows him to enter the scene in spectral form, thus haunting the tradition Abraham establishes. But there is a third father at play, for “Abraham cannot be a father without the son who will make him a father,”¹⁷¹ and without the promise of posterity, which in the Bible extends to entire nations for each of his sons. Thus, Ishmael is both a reinforcement of Abraham’s fatherhood and a father himself—the father, in fact, of an entire nation.

With this analysis of the paternal structures at play in Islam, Benslama returns to the original question of Freud’s brief statement on the religion: that it is an “imitation,” that eventually “exhausted itself” perhaps because it lacked the murder of its founder. Benslama concludes in the vein of Freud that Islam’s paternal origins are, indeed, not organic: “there is no natural paternity at the origin, no manipulation of any substance...” Instead, “the original paternity is the result of a speech act by the founding Prophet; it is displacement through speech.”¹⁷² Benslama draws from Jahiz, a ninth-century Arab rationalist author, who puts it plainly: “‘if the Prophet hadn’t said: ‘Ishmael was an Arab,’ he could only be, to our eyes, non-Arab because the non-Arab cannot become Arab and vice-versa; and we know that Ishmael became Arab after having been non-Arab solely because the prophet said it.’”¹⁷³ This operation is not, as Freud thought, *imitational*, but *translational*. Muhammad appears

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 75.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Jahiz, *Rasa’il al-Jahiz*, (Cairo: Al-Sandubi, 1933), 292 as cited in Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 75.

as yet another father figure who translates the (father and son) story of Genesis—the story of a different people—into the tradition he is founding.

But this act of translation is far from unique to Islam; in fact, Benslama points out that Freud’s entire theory in *Moses and Monotheism* is none other than a translation itself. In making Moses an Egyptian, Freud posits a non-natural origin for a religious tradition; he tells us that the foundation of Judaism occurs through the reappropriation and translation of a preexisting Egyptian monotheistic tradition. But Freud himself never refers to this as a “translation”; as Benslama puts it, Freud “does not feel the need to theorize about translation in the process of the formation of origin, in the genesis of institutions and their symbolic order.”¹⁷⁴ It is this failure to think critically about the process of translation that, in Benslama’s book, leaves Freud “a prisoner of the ethnocentric view of Orientalism, making Islam an *imitation* where he should have seen *translation*.”¹⁷⁵

Benslama expresses surprise that translation has not yet occurred to psychoanalysis—for any introduction of the foreign into something foundational involves a work of translation, from one culture, sometimes language, to another. Freud’s Moses theory is but one example of the translational operation; Christianity has its Paul, whose Epistle to the Hebrews was written in Greek, and its Luther, who established a foundational text and institution through his literal translation of the Bible into German.¹⁷⁶ But monotheism fails to acknowledge its foundational acts of translation; it “erases the originary translation of the father of its conception,” and

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 77.

instead attempts to “[establish] paternity and origin on the basis of a virginal relation of identity.”¹⁷⁷ This is the theological conception of the origin; it claims to be “monolingual, exclusive, immaculate, and unisexual.”¹⁷⁸ But psychoanalysis destabilizes this narrative of pure origins, and it is that destabilization that Benslama wrests from Freud’s legacy. Armed with Freud’s theory of Moses, and his concept of the primal father, psychoanalysis is able to reexamine the longstanding theological notion of origins. Here, Benslama’s theory echoes Saïd’s sentiments on what we can take from Freud in the modern age—for if, in fact, every foundation requires some sort of translation, “identity cannot be worked through itself alone.”¹⁷⁹ There must always be some “outsider,” some Egyptian Moses, who challenges our concept of uniform, pure identities.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 78.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Saïd, *Freud and the Non-European*, 54.

CHAPTER TWO

PSYCHOANALYZING THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE IN ISLAM

"...what if the true scandal this veil endeavors to obfuscate is not the feminine body hidden by it, but the INEXISTENCE of the feminine? What if, consequently, the ultimate function of the veil is precisely to sustain the illusion that there IS something, the substantial-Thing, behind the veil? ...Woman is a treat because she stands for the 'undecidability' of truth, for a succession of veils beneath which there is no ultimate hidden core; by veiling her, we create the illusion that there is, beneath the veil, the feminine Truth--the horrible truth of lie and deception, of course."

--Slavoj Žižek¹⁸⁰

While the image of the male Muslim terrorist, as we saw in Chapter One, is certainly in wide circulation in the West, perhaps a site of even more contestation in France today is that of the Muslim female, forced to cover herself in public. In the Western mind, the sight of a veiled woman conjures up concepts of oppression, gender inequality, and general "backwardness"; in France many argue that it is not only that public veil-wearing violates the rules of *laïcité*, but that it violates a certain standard of fundamental human rights and equality seen as central to a Western Republic.

Of course, the motivations behind veiling are not readily generalizable, and recently, various activist organizations and women have alerted the French world to the fact that for some, veiling is far from imposed, but the result of a free, enlightened choice. Take, for example, *Collectif des Féministes pour l'Égalité* (Collective of Feminists for Equality), a pro-veiling group that has dedicated itself to the fight

¹⁸⁰ Žižek, *A Glance into the Archives of Islam*.

against sexist discrimination and has couched the discussion of the veil in “Western” terms of individual choice: “We fight against the obligatory veil and against obligatory unveiling, for the right to have our heads uncovered or covered; it is the same fight: the fight for freedom of choice and, more precisely, for the right of each woman to dispose of her body as she wishes.”¹⁸¹ For others, veiling carries a sense of “defiance, a refusal of the Western lifestyle and values of colonizers—whether classic imperialists, or, now, global exploiters—and an insistence on the integrity of a history and religion that have for so long been demeaned.”¹⁸² Regardless of the meanings and their reappropriations that individual women now associate with their personal practice of veiling, the fact remains that, for many a passerby, the sight of a veiled woman immediately connotes female subjugation. Thus, goals of gender equality often conflicts with goals of religious equality, and religious tolerance: in attempting to ensure female rights, anti-veilers trample on what others perceive as the religious freedom of expression.

If we understand this ongoing political discussion as their context, it makes sense that those working to psychoanalyze Islam have devoted particular attention to the role of the female—it is the female, after all, whose visible symbol of both cultural difference, and, arguably, of oppression, positions her at the ground of debate surrounding questions of French identity and its need either to expand or expel difference. But the exact nature of this difference—of the Western, unveiled female, and her veiled Muslim counterpart—is often opaque, and it is the psychoanalytic

¹⁸¹ Chouder, Latrèche, and Tevanian, *Les filles voiles parlent*, 327, cited in Scott *The Fantasy*, 110.

¹⁸² Scott, *Politics of the Veil*, 67.

project that aims to illuminate it, to probe deeper into the Muslim psyche to parse out the source of difference. Is gendered agency, specifically female agency, some ask, operating differently in Islam than it does in say, Judaism or Christianity?

In order to attempt to understand the place of the feminine within contemporary times, some, like Fethi Benslama, have turned their analyses to canonical, textual sources, combing through episodes within the Quran and Hadith for signs of repressed material at the heart of the religious corpus. But the psychoanalytic perspective is not limited to scholarly textual analyses: in fact, Elisabeth Roudinesco, psychoanalyst and famed biographer of Jacques Lacan, brings her Freudian leanings to bear in the political realm in her 2003 article, *Le foulard à l'école, étouffoir de l'altérité*.¹⁸³ While Benslama provides psychoanalytic readings of foundational texts and stories, Roudinesco focuses on the possibility for analysis of the present moment—of the potential feelings of the individual female who wears her veil to a French public school.

This chapter will go on to probe two theories on the veiled Muslim female, beginning with Benslama's conjecture about the central repudiation of Hagar in both the Quran and the Hadith, and closing with an exploration of the political arguments offered in Roudinesco's article. Finally, I will explore yet another application of psychoanalysis to the issue of the veiled female—one, however, that serves not to theorize about the role of women within the boundaries of Islam, but instead to complicate the presumption that Islam is problematic for females in a way that “modern” secularism is not. This is Joan Wallach Scott's essay, entitled “Sexularism”

¹⁸³ *The Headscarf at School, Represses Alterity*; my translation.

(2011), in which she argues that despite the rhetoric of many pro-veil-ban French politicians, secularism has not resolved the difficulties of sexual difference any more than has Islam, or religion in general. My goal in this exploration is not to offer any definitive answer to the question of *the role of the female in Islam*—rather, by examining the current attempts to answer this question psychoanalytically, I aim to illuminate the unstable border between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ that structures French society—a border that some of these texts work to destabilize, and others aim to police.

HAGAR THE MUSLIM MOSES: BENSLAMA’S THEORY OF THE FEMALE IN ISLAM

One feature of Islamic doctrine that has sparked the interest of several theorists is Hagar’s total absence from the Quran. While Abraham and Ishmael are mentioned dozens of times, “Hagar is unmentioned, erased from the official history.”¹⁸⁴ It is true that the diminishment of a textual female character is not unique to Islam, that other monotheistic traditions feature females whose symbolic dignity comes only through giving birth to sons, and that most often it is the sons who become the heroes, the founders, or the fathers. In fact, Benslama acknowledges that “it is obvious that Islam is not the only religion of the ancient world to marginalize the position of women in its spiritual structure, to exclude them from legal institutions of power, or to deprecate the female body.”¹⁸⁵ But Hagar is literally cast out into the desert—and cast out of the Quranic text entirely. Her elimination (in both name and

¹⁸⁴ Žižek, *A Glance into the Archives of Islam*.

¹⁸⁵ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 109.

existence) stands out more dramatically than the marginal roles played by other females in monotheistic tradition when we consider that all of the other protagonists who populate the same Genesis story are welcomed into the Quranic text. “Hagar’s story,” then, Benslama tells us, “is one of repudiation at monotheism’s origin, which became disavowal when Islam began.”¹⁸⁶

Benslama’s project mirrors Freud’s treatment of religion. As mentioned earlier¹⁸⁷, Freud’s theories on religion center around what he deems its central repression: the repression of the tribe’s original killing of the father in *Totem and Taboo*, and the repression of Moses’s gentile Egyptian heritage in Judaism. Hagar’s absence—her, as it were, *repression*—consequently becomes the site of Benslama’s psychoanalytic investigation into the female in Islam. “What effect does [Hagar’s eradication from Islam’s founding texts] have on the constitution of Islam’s symbolic order,” he asks, “and to what extent is there a relationship between this and the condition of women in Islamic societies?”¹⁸⁸

This question inaugurates a project of Lacanian dimensions—to search for a connection between the textual treatment of Hagar and the contemporary condition of women in Islamic societies requires a strain of psychoanalysis that is specifically post-Freud. Lacan theorized about the relationship between the formation of the unconscious and linguistic systems, which pre-exist the formation of subjectivity and always, in some way, mediate it. Indeed it is Lacanian psychoanalysis that has prevailed in France; none of

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 110.

¹⁸⁷ See pages 6-7 of this thesis.

¹⁸⁸ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 109.

the major trends of international Freudian thought ever get established in France: neither ego psychology, nor Kleinianism, nor Anna-Freudianism, nor self psychology, nor the post-Kleinian theories of Wilfred Ruprecht Bion. It has thus been Lacanianism, and nothing but Lacanianism, that has polarized the field of French psychoanalysis for more than thirty years: non-Lacanian (sometimes known as ‘orthodox Freudians’) on one side and Lacanians on the other, with everyone of course claiming descent from Freud.¹⁸⁹

Because Benslama’s reading of the woman in Islam deploys Lacanian terms and theory, I will draw on my understanding of Lacanian theory before exploring how that theory is applied to Islam in Benslama’s work.¹⁹⁰

Like Freud, Lacan concerns himself with the formation of the unconscious, examining processes he perceives in infancy and early childhood, and theorizing about how such processes continue to affect individuals throughout their adult lives. Lacan identifies three major early developmental stages. The first occurs when children are less than six months old. During this stage, the infant does not yet differentiate between objects and boundaries—importantly, the infant does not yet recognize himself as a “self”, as a different object than the mother whose breast he suckles. This sheer materiality of existence is the closest humans ever come to what Lacan terms “the Real,” a reality unmediated by the narcissistic imagination and by culture’s norms and prohibitions.

¹⁸⁹ Roudinesco, *Why Psychoanalysis?*, 134.

¹⁹⁰ Here my understanding of Lacanian theory draws on Lacan’s seminars in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Bruce Fink, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), in addition to secondary sources on Lacanian theory including Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, “Psychoanalysis after Freud,” *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Ed. Patricia Waugh, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Néstor A. Braunstein, “Desire and jouissance in the teachings of Lacan,” *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Dana Felluga, “Modules on Psychoanalysis,” *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, last modified January 31, 2011, Purdue University, accessed April 4, 2013, <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/psychmodules.html>>.

The start of the next stage of development is marked by the subject's initial recognition of self; the subject envisions himself as "I", an object among other objects, in what is famously known as the Mirror Stage. But in recognizing oneself in a figurative mirror, the subject necessarily recognizes himself as *other*; self-recognition is infused with inherent self-alienation. The infant, who at this time does not yet have complete control over the movement of his limbs or his bowel movements, sees an ideal, fully-formed self in the figurative mirror—he sees subjects around him in control of themselves, and envisions himself as such a subject. But the moment of recognition is always a moment of misrecognition, of what Lacan calls *méconnaissance*, because the infant mistakes his fragmented, chaotic body for an ideal self. This disjuncture between the real self and the idealized image of self will haunt the subject for the rest of his life. This moment of recognition, or misrecognition, marks the subject's entrance into "the Imaginary" and establishes what Lacan calls "the Imaginary Order."

But the subject will only move farther from "the Real" as he acquires language, marking the next stage in Lacan's theory: the move into "the Symbolic". Lacan refers to "the Symbolic" with various terms throughout his seminars, sometimes using the "Big Other," or the "Name-of-the-Father." Each of these terms refers to the social order one enters through language, to the discourse every speaking and comprehending subject inhabits. Lacan's theory is that linguistic structure carries within it cultural norms, ideology, and laws; in order to enter into the social order, a subject sacrifices his unmediated materiality to become a signifier in a system that pre-exists him, taking up language and culture that only further separate him from his

originary experience of “the Real.” “The Real,” this inexpressible realm beyond language, a realm free from the influence of societal order, then becomes a space unto which the speaking subject, now inculcated in culture, can never return.

So what comes to structure the individual’s life is the feeling of a *lack*—as we saw in Kristeva’s theory in Chapter One as well, humans are haunted by a longing to return to the unmediated world of the purely material of infancy, to recover the “oceanic feeling,” in Freudian and Kristevan terms. Because “the Real” is always that which eludes our inherently mediated reality, that which resists symbolization, the subject is constantly seeking to recover the “Real,” to satisfy the lack. The lack refers to the fundamental Saussurian disjuncture between reality and the language used to represent it: Lacan applies this structuralist notion to our psychologies, claiming that our subjectivities are so inculcated in this system of signified and signifier that we are necessarily affected by that system’s failure to ever fully capture human reality. The symbol of the phallus comes to stand in the place of everything the subject loses through his entrance into language; we associate the phallus with the power of the Name-of-the-Father, with the laws and regulations of society that we accept when we enter the Symbolic Order. Lacan emphasizes the distinction between *being* and *having* the phallus: women are both *more lacking* than men (never accessing the symbolic phallus, the law of the father, as fully as men do) and *more full*—because they do not experience the loss of the penis as fully as men do upon entrance into the symbolic order; they retain more pre-linguistic bodily drives than do their male counterparts.

The lack—experienced by everyone, men and women alike—and our relation to it comes to determine the formation of desire. For “it is that lack at the heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire. To come too close to our object of desire threatens to uncover the lack that is, in fact, necessary for our desire to persist...”¹⁹¹ Desire is articulated through fantasy and to some extent, driven by the very impossibility of being satisfied. But Benslama’s analysis focuses less on desire than it does on *jouissance*, a Lacanian term that is notoriously almost as difficult to translate as it is to define. *Jouissance*, in Benslama’s reading, refers to “something that relates to the body proper as singular experience, one that is impossible to share and always excessive;”¹⁹² in fact, *jouissance* is by definition the experience of pleasure that exceeds the pleasure principle and is thus experienced as a painful pleasure. As Lacan himself describes it:

What I call *jouissance*—in the sense in which the body experiences itself—is always in the nature of tension, in the nature of a forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit. Unquestionably, there is *jouissance* at the level at which pain begins to appear, and we know that it is only at this level of pain that a whole dimension of the organism, which would otherwise remain veiled, can be experienced.¹⁹³

Jouissance appears as the satisfaction of a drive, and is surrounded by a barrier which makes it difficult for the subject to access.¹⁹⁴ But the satisfaction of *jouissance* “is neither the satisfaction of a need nor the satisfaction of a demand. It is also not the

¹⁹¹ Dana Felluga, “Modules on Psychoanalysis,” *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, last modified January 31, 2011, Purdue University, accessed April 4, 2013, <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/psychmodules.html>.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁹³ Jacques Lacan, “Psychanalyse et médecine” (1966), *Lettres de l’école freudienne 1* (1967), 60 as cited in Néstor A. Braunstein, “Desire and *jouissance* in the teachings of Lacan,” *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Henceforth “Braunstein, *Desire and jouissance*.”

¹⁹⁴ See Jacques Lacan, Seminar VII, “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,” as drawn on in Braunstein, *Desire and jouissance*.

satisfaction of any bodily drive but one linked to the death drive...”¹⁹⁵ This is what Benslama means when he says that “*jouissance* is, in a sense, good for ‘nothing.’”¹⁹⁶ And yet according to his theory on Islam, it is through this “nothing” that a lasting social order is determined, “it is by this nothing that the most serious imbalances are created, that the law establishes its prohibitions, and that sovereignty fails.”¹⁹⁷

Benslama goes on to posit an argument about the relationship between Hagar’s absence, Islam’s symbolic order, and the manifestation of that order in the present day—in fact, he assigns to the initial eradication some long-lasting consequences: “...what was eliminated at the beginning [Hagar] cannot be so easily restored,” he explains; “on the contrary, this event will continue to possess the institution and haunt it throughout its history as long as it remains ignored. Islam arose from the (female) foreigner when monotheism originated, and she has remained estranged in Islam.”¹⁹⁸ Benslama’s argument is that the specter of the woman who was repudiated and then disavowed from the place of *Référence*¹⁹⁹ continues to haunt Islamic thinking and institutions—just as the primal father haunts the Abrahamic traditions, this expelled figure of Hagar becomes a specter at work between the lines of Islam.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Hagar is that she is not just “woman” but “Other woman”: she is not Abraham’s wife, not his chosen mate, but the “Other,”

¹⁹⁵ Braunstein, *Desire and jouissance*, 105.

¹⁹⁶ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 148.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁹⁹ Benslama here draws on *Référence*, a concept developed by Pierre Legendre to designate the mythical place of the provenance of the law. This mythical place is host to a multitude of signifiers, images, emblems, etc. See Legendre’s *L’Inestimable objet de la transmission* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), 178ff as drawn on in Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 110.

excluded both from the institutions of matrimony and blood relations. Benslama argues that the “other woman” cannot be understood alone—the very designation of “other” embeds her identity within a relationship to another woman, in Hagar’s case Sarah. In fact, “the other woman is always the wife’s double: she doubles the official wife, precedes her, supplants her from the outset in the play of maternity, and disturbs the process of difference division in the family.”²⁰⁰ But it is the official wife who still retains her titles, and with them, the power of the symbolic law. Benslama points out that Sarah is referred to as “the wife of Abraham” in the Quran and “the promise” according to Saint Paul—but perhaps even more importantly, she gives birth to the people of the book, making her “the divine Mother, the wife who has been sacralized, sanctified.”²⁰¹ This is why Benslama refers to Sarah as “the woman of the Other”—unlike the “other woman,” who is foreign, this woman is *of the Other*, meaning she stands for the Lacanian “Other” and the symbolic order. In other words, Sarah, the official wife, is on the side of our societal norms and laws, while Hagar, the “other woman,” is written out of this order. Sarah is part of the same family and same tribe as the man who will be the father or founder of a symbolic institution. The “other woman,” in contrast, is of lowly birth; “she can give birth, but she does not acquire the position of ‘Her Highness the Mother,’” for her womb is merely borrowed and can circulate among men.²⁰² Yet this low ranking woman is, in fact, according to Benslama, extremely powerful: her power is of a hidden, disturbing sort that he relates to a type of *jouissance* contained in two parts.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 110.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

Borrowing Lacan's term of *jouissance*, Benslama explores the two segments of it that he sees at work in the "other woman," using the emblematic example of Hagar. The first element is the unique knowledge of alterity: "The Hagar of the Bible sees god and does not die, names him, then sees the resuscitating source in the ground."²⁰³ No other woman in the Bible is granted the privilege of such a vision. The second segment of *jouissance* is contained in the other woman's capacity to birth an entire nation, in her proliferation of progeny. Through a reading of Saint Paul's letters, Benslama concludes that this *jouissance* is associated with a rough, wandering, painful, seductive, and therefore perverse life—one that revolts against the official wife, pushing her aside without occupying her role completely, and forcing her into symbolic castration.²⁰⁴ It is the connection of these two segments of *jouissance*—the knowledge of alterity and the life-giving body of desire—that "makes the other woman a disturbing and feared figure."²⁰⁵ The other woman and the woman of the Other are co-constructed through their relational opposition: the woman of the Other becomes the official symbol of the Mother only because there is an unofficial version from which she must be designated as distinct and superior. But just as the other woman constructs and maintains this superior woman of the Other, the other woman simultaneously threatens her official counterpart by way of her very existence.

Benslama identifies the schema of two women present in other Islamic texts and episodes. He explores the story of Muhammad's conception as told by several

²⁰³ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 111.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

authors (Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hicham, and Tabari)²⁰⁶ who are considered to be the principal biographical sources for the Prophet. The story takes place just after Muhammad's father, Abdullah, has just narrowly escaped his own demise—his own father exchanged his vow to sacrifice his child for the slaughter of a multitude of camels offered up to the pre-Islamic divinities of Mecca. Abdullah is walking with his father to meet his future wife, Amina, a woman his father has selected for him, when, as the story goes, he walks past a different woman, Ruqayya. In all versions of the narrative, Ruqayya sexually propositions Abdullah and he refuses, saying that at the moment he is with his father. He meets Amina and has intercourse with her, thus conceiving Muhammad. After his interaction with Amina and the conception of his son, Abdullah returns to Ruqayya, asking her if she will now take him up on what she offered to him the day before. But it is Ruqayya's turn to refuse Abdullah's advances: she tells him, according to Ibn Hicham, "You no longer have the light you had yesterday. I no longer have any desire for you today," and according to a different, but similar version, "No. When you passed by me, there was a white glow between your eyes; I called you then and you refused; you entered the home of Amina, she has stolen you."²⁰⁷ Tabari, a ninth century Persian scholar, sheds more light on this: in his explanation, Ruqayya was a seer and knew from scripture of the coming birth of the Prophet, hence her proposition of intercourse with Abdullah. However, once the Prophet was conceived within Amina, the glowing light in Abdullah's forehead disappeared, alerting Ruqayya the next time she saw him that his treasure (the

²⁰⁶ See Muhammad Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Ibn Ishaq* (seventh century) based on manuscript (Maison d'édition et de diffusion de Konya, Turkey, 1981); see Ibn Hicham's *Assayrat an-nabawyya* (Beirut: Dar al-ma'rifa, n.d.), vol. 2; see Tabari *Tarikh ar-rusul wa al-muluk*, translated as *Muhammad sceau des prophètes* (Paris : Sindbad, 1980).

²⁰⁷ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 112, 113.

forthcoming Prophet) had already departed his body. Regardless of the slight variations in the versions of the story, Benslama is insistent on the significance of the fact that “it is in this space, through this back-and-forth from one woman to the other, that the Islamic narrative has chosen to set the stage for the most radical question of origin [that of the Prophet].”²⁰⁸

Benslama draws several conclusions from this scene. First, “the question of the ‘between-two-women’...[is] held in tension between the subject’s desire and the father’s choice.”²⁰⁹ From the very first encounter between Abdullah and Ruqayyah, the father is invoked, as Abdullah refuses her sexual advances because at the moment he is walking with his father. Though he desires Ruqayyah, his father has chosen a different woman for him, whom he is on his way to meet. And yet the choice of the law of the father above the desire for the other woman is not complete, for the story does not end with Abdullah’s refusal and happy-ever-after settlement with his new wife Amina. Instead, he returns to the woman who tempted him the next day, “the approved woman not having satisfied his desire.”²¹⁰ This time, however, his desire cannot be satisfied: “when she wants, he does not want, and when he wants, she does not want;” therefore, “[r]ather than an insurmountable obstacle, the father’s prescript creates a discordance in the time of desire.”²¹¹ Already, Benslama claims, even in this pre-origin and thus in some ways, pre-Islamic story, we see the foundation laid for a discordance between desire and the symbolic law as represented by the father.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 113.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 114.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

But regardless of the brief disruption from Ruqayyah, it is the symbolic law of the father that ultimately determines destiny in this story. Benslama notes that Ruqayya is referred to in several versions of Muhammad's biography as "the sister of Waraqa, a Christian monk who recognized the prophetic signs of Muhammad's arrival."²¹² Thus, like Hagar, she is foreign and seer-like, endowed with a unique clairvoyance and power, and yet she is the unapproved woman who stands in contrast to the noble one (Amina) from the same tribe as Abdullah. She is the quintessential "other woman." Though Ruqayya is portrayed as prophetic, Abdullah, the vessel of her desired object (the glow of the prophet's to-be-conception), is "characterized by ignorance and contempt...Abdullah does not know he carries the sign of fecundity that will produce the son, who will be the initiator of origin,"²¹³ and thus is sadly mistaken in believing that Ruqayyah desires *him* as opposed to the glow he carries. Benslama illustrates the misunderstanding that passes between the two figures: the other woman "enjoys a knowledge about light and body...that is invisible to the father who carries it," and Abdullah supposes himself an object of desire "only to reject the other, that puts the Other [the yet unborn symbolic order] in his place."²¹⁴ This misunderstanding, in which neither the other woman nor the father of the father satisfy their desires, instead privileges the law of the father, which reigns victorious: "it is neither knowledge nor the possession of the phallus that determines destiny and destination [in this story], but the law of the father. No one is master of the light (semen) other than this law, which preexists the birth of the founder of the law."²¹⁵

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 115.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

The temporality here seems to defy linear chronology; the law of the father rules even before the father who will found this law has been conceived.

Finally, Benslama draws out one final element of his analysis from this episode on the conception of the Prophet: that of the underlying rivalry between the two women involved. As opposed to a rivalry centered around the man as sexual object, this rivalry is one of “access to the status of woman of the Other and to the phallic *jouissance* that access confers, that is, the supreme power of engendering the son who will become the founding father.”²¹⁶ The tension of the rivalry does not, however, remain unresolved: Amina becomes the Mother, the woman of the Other, while Ruqayyah is destined to remain the foreigner, “empty and ‘without desire,’ as she says in the story.”²¹⁷ Here, we see a story that reenacts the genesis of the father in Genesis (Ishmael), but this story claims to better control the situation—it succeeds in fully dismissing the other woman, who exits the scene, unlike Hagar, empty, without seed.²¹⁸

A comparison to the Mosaic-origin tale of Judaism allows Benslama to examine what is central to the Islamic version. While for Moses’s mother and the foreign Egyptian woman, saving the child is the central goal, the story of Muhammad’s conception is less concerned with his survival than it is with the question of the relationship between desire and law. Both traditions, he claims, Judaism and Islam, are haunted by “the risk of its origin, or its originary fault.”²¹⁹ Instead, Benslama here makes a veritable attempt to place Islam within Freud’s

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 116.

framework on Judaism, highlighting an event in the religion's origins that haunts it into present. While in Judaism, the spectral origin is the threat of the destruction of the son, which in the story of Moses, becomes a site and source of salvation (i.e. it is Pharaoh's family who originally rescues Moses from the basket on the Nile but it is also Pharaoh who constantly threatens Moses's destruction), Islam is haunted not by this potential destruction of the son, but instead by "the other woman, who has threatened to capture the son, making him an illegitimate bastard."²²⁰ In total then, the space-between-the-two-women narrative carries with it the establishment of "the nobility of the mother's birth, control of the other woman, and the preservation of the son's seed through the father"²²¹—three features that Benslama claims will have effects on Islam that remain palpable in the present day.

Unsurprisingly, "the control of the other woman" is the feature Benslama sees as carrying with it the most ramifications; according to his argument, this element of the symbolic field, as established by the original narrative, would be hugely influential. *This* is how Benslama's textually-based theory responds to the issue of his time, as he quickly draws a connection between this early need to control the other woman and the contemporary discussion of veiling in France. "The veil and the sign—in France, for the past ten years or so, a debate of unusual proportions has centered on the violent association of these words,"²²² he writes, and "between the veil and the sign, something akin to a semiological work site of foundations has suddenly been exposed."²²³

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid, 124.

²²³ Ibid, 125.

But is the veil a “sign” as the French law has designated it? Is it an ostentatious manifestation of religiosity? Benslama argues that in fact, it is not simply a sign, but “a mechanism for blinding the female body and its internal seclusion, which the Islamic institution of origins has imposed.”²²⁴ As he parses through the issues at stake in the French semiotic sphere today, the Maghrebi psychoanalyst never loses sight of what he perceives to be at the heart of the veil’s existence: “the disavowal of the other woman as a center around which a series of repressions at the base of the system revolves.”²²⁵ When viewed from this perspective of Islamic theology, the veil is not a sign, but

a thing through which the female body is partially or wholly obscured because that body has the power to charm and fascinate. In other words, for religion it is the woman’s *body* that is ostentatious, whereas the veil would serve as a *filter* that does away with and protects against the body’s disturbing effects.²²⁶

Part of the fundamental misunderstanding surrounding the veil in France is the government’s understanding of it not as a filter but as a sign, while for Muslims, Benslama claims, the only outward signs of identity expression are aestheticizations of the divine letter. “A minimum investigation,” on the part of the French government, “would have shown that the veil plays no part in this form of interpretation but is governed by a theological logic of real *control* over a woman’s body for the purpose of subjugation.”²²⁷ The discussion of signs, of a semiological censor, thus appears pointless, rendering the veil “semiologically overdetermined in terms of current political struggles,” while the “real register of the veil remains

²²⁴ Ibid, 124.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid, 126.

²²⁷ Ibid.

preponderant, however, in historical references to the Islamic corpus of the law (sharia).”²²⁸ Within sharia law, the veil is a central element of a system of concealment, which includes more proscriptions than the donning of the veil itself; things like muffling the sound of the voice and eliminating the tinkling of jewelry are also part of this system. In fact, most Arabic lexicons define *hijab*, which we use to refer to “veil,” as *anything* forbidden. In this way, veiling encompasses more than the sign or symbol of the veil itself that it has come to represent in French law—rather, “veiling is...a theological operation of concealing the woman in order to neutralize her.”²²⁹ Thus the practice of veiling is exactly, Benslama tells us, what Freud would call an example of the “psychological poverty of the masses,” as according to Freud, “the curb put upon love by civilization involves a universal tendency to debase sexual objects.”²³⁰

But let us not forget what it is particularly about these sexual objects, about the figure of the Muslim ‘other woman’, that is believed to require debasement in the first place. It is the woman’s knowledge of truth—in Ruqayya’s case, a knowledge of the coming of the founder himself—that preexists any masculine knowledge, which is so disturbing and threatening to the Islamic order.

Within the Islamic context, both Hagar and Ruqayya possess an arrogant power of clairvoyance that enables one of them to see god without dying and name him with the name of that vision, and the other to perceive the glow of sanctity and want to capture it. The veil is the response in the real to this cranial eye that imaginarily defies divine alterity.²³¹

²²⁸ Ibid, 127.

²²⁹ Ibid, 128.

²³⁰ Sigmund Freud, “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in The Sphere of Love”, 1912, 11:177-90, as quoted in Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 124.

²³¹ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 131.

The logic here is that woman sees clearly what man does not—a threat to the masculine symbolic order—and consequently, woman herself must be controlled, must not be seen. In fact, the other woman challenged Muhammad’s very conception: were Abdullah to have yielded to Ruqayyah’s proposition, he never would have conceived Muhammad through his intercourse with Amina. In this way the very existence of the other woman destabilizes the certainty of the establishment of Islam through Muhammad. It is in the interest of Islam to keep this destabilization at bay.

According to Benslama, the attempt to control woman’s clairvoyance manifests itself in a twofold repression: the woman tries to break from her own clairvoyance, from the power that allows her to see, “while for the man, it is a question not only of concealing the woman as a real object of desire but of transforming her through her concealment into an obviated fantasy, an ideational body with the promise of infinite unveiling, like a *houri* in paradise, whose hymen is continuously reconstituted.”²³² Man is able to protect his own power of sight by reducing woman and her power to “a fable, an obscure mirage”²³³—and this, all through the veil. The veil is considered to be erected both between the female and God and between the female and the male, whose “desire she arouses and whose power she terrorizes through his obsession”²³⁴ with her clairvoyance.

But regardless of whether the veil is considered a “sign” according to sharia law and Islamic theology, it has come to be viewed as one in France today. In fact, Benslama argues, “by making it one sign among many, the veil was hidden behind a

²³² Ibid, 129.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid, 132.

curtain of religious semiology to avoid confronting the fearful question of the prohibition of the prohibition of the other.”²³⁵ But if we consider the veil within this current definition of sign, the veil becomes the signifier,

the bar beneath which woman becomes an invisible and inaudible signified. In its canonical form, which does not allow any patch of skin to appear, it reduces every woman to an anonymous and undifferentiated entity insofar as she is a person. It totalizes women, abstracts them, ties them to a unique signifier: beneath the veil is *woman*. It is a ghostly apparition on a shapeless body making its way down the street...An undecidable, indeterminate, virtual woman who combines infinite attraction and repulsion, she becomes the subject of doubt, error, and speculation, a fiction for which opposites struggle.²³⁶

This is what has become of the veil in its current Muslim conception: not simply a means of filtering, concealing, or controlling woman, it comes to be a way of totalizing her beneath a single sign, of distilling her into a “virtual woman” around whom speculation and fictions arise. And yet this seclusion of the Muslim woman beneath the veil, in some ways, turns in on itself—for as opposed to quelling the clairvoyance it sought to contain, it only serves to establish the veiled woman as gifted with occult powers. The “signified is not only a mental image,” but, as a veiled being, is “a living and mysterious presence, which acts within the straitjacket of its imprisonment.”²³⁷ The veil is not a mere religious sign then, says Benslama, but a means of producing truth; it both represses woman and, in its very repression, ignites the idea of her divine powers, shrouding the woman in mystery that bespeaks divinity.

But there is more to be gleaned from textual exegesis about the current status of the female in Islam, and an important clue resides in Muhammad’s change in

²³⁵ Ibid, 140.

²³⁶ Ibid, 128, 129.

²³⁷ Ibid, 129.

behavior toward women. Benslama points out that he goes from a long-term monogamous relationship with his first wife, Khadija, to suddenly taking many wives after her death. Though people have attempted to account for this through historical circumstances and political sociology, Benslama says Muhammad's major shift in sexual relationships with females cannot be reduced to such a perspective. Khadija remained the Prophet's only wife until her death at about age sixty, so that "the Prophet went from having a great attachment to a maternal figure to 'feminine' figures of woman, from a strictly monogamous relationship to multiple relationships, which he adopted not only out of obligation or tactical considerations but out of desire, or pleasure."²³⁸ This leads Benslama to a hypothesis connecting "this change with a modification of the Prophet's relationship to the enigma of female *jouissance* in his own economy of *jouissance*."²³⁹ If Muhammad suddenly desired a multitude of women, perhaps he had come to believe in the necessity of woman and her powers in order for him, a male without the clairvoyance of the other woman, to receive the divine. Perhaps, Benslama speculates, "he had to believe in this position of receptivity, of submission to the angel, and had to fully assume it."²⁴⁰ Indeed, perhaps Muhammad realized that woman has access to a *jouissance* that man can comprehend only through "a remarkable prophetic dignity."²⁴¹

What does it mean that woman can access a *jouissance* that lies out of reach of man (save for those, like the Prophet, who attain it through divine election)?

According to Benslama, the stakes are of gargantuan proportion:

²³⁸ Ibid, 145.

²³⁹ Ibid, 146.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 147.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 148.

If man needs an operation of the mind or letter, angels and demons, gods and devils...to achieve what woman enjoys solely from the fact of being a woman, we can imagine the consequences such a finding will have for the theological order and its system, which relies upon phallic organization: consequences that affect truth, sovereignty, the difference between man and woman, the establishment of power and *jouissance* as models.²⁴²

Some of the consequences of this difference are rooted in the scene in which Muhammad first receives the word of God, the word of the law. In it, he is visited by an invisible being in his hallucinations, and is concerned that he is possessed not by God but by some demon. It is Khadija who holds Muhammad in her lap in order to prove to him that the angel speaking to him is indeed an angel as opposed to a Satanic creature—Khadija’s unveiling, and according to some versions of the story, her invitation for Muhammad to penetrate her, would have attracted a demon to stay and watch. Khadija’s act provides the reassurance that Gabriel is in fact an angel, for he flees as soon as Khadija unveils herself, thus proving himself void of the perversity associated with the devil. Thus, “the scene clearly reveals that the representation of the origin of the Law in Islam needed the body of a woman to remove any doubt concerning man’s reason and to help the angel place him on the path of the word.”²⁴³

According to Benslama, within this configuration lie several facets of the presentation of the female that will influence the configuration of *jouissance* within the structure of Islamic society. First, woman “is presented as a (negative) power able to test the source of speech and distinguish what is true from what is false;”²⁴⁴ she is granted a diagnostic ability to discern reason and unreason. Second, woman functions as a mediator between man and the angel, and because the angel himself is a mediator

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid, 144.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 148.

between man and God, woman “fulfills the function of mediation between mediators, as if she inhabited not an interval or delimited region but a conjunction of edges.”²⁴⁵ Additionally, woman possesses a knowledge that is not filtered through language, but through her body—it is through the unveiling of her physical self that she is able to tell angel from demon, truth from falsity. Finally, Benslama concludes that “if *woman is between the angel and man*, if she understands the boundaries between reason and unreason, and if her knowledge is not acquired by customary means, it is because her identity continually overflows identities. Each of these consequences taken in itself constitutes a danger for theological order and imperils sovereignty.”²⁴⁶

Like Hagar and Ruqayyah before her, Khadija’s powerful and necessary contribution to Muhammad’s discernment of truth incites fear for the stability of the patriarchal theological order—a fear that Benslama claims has inspired institutionalized repudiation and the subsequent repression of that repudiation. For “to the extent that woman’s body possesses a knowledge that seems to predate that of the Prophet...it will become necessary to eradicate her in all her manifestations.”²⁴⁷ But how does this eradication occur? The response to woman’s ontological challenge to the theological order, Benslama tell us, is to throw a screen over woman’s body.

Finally, the analyst delivers his conclusion about the role of women in Islam:

In its early stages, Islam, through the position of its founder’s receiving the letter, was exposed to the enigma of Other jouissance in such a caustic manner that, once the turmoil and confusion of the initial experience was over, Islam had recourse to a stream of proscriptions to reduce, dismantle, then deny that Other jouissance, so as to gradually establish the sovereignty of a phallic, juridical, and ethical order congruent with the formation of the state. In short, Islam constructed an internal wall, which served as a forceful

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 149, my emphasis.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 150.

counter-feminine dam, one that was all the more powerful as the exposure to its abyss was so intense and central to its original focus.²⁴⁸

For Benslama, then, Islam, is founded around this attempt to deny woman's Other *jouissance*, its attempt to eradicate it. Denial attempts to reduce all female *jouissance* into phallic sexual enjoyment through a model of masculine sexuality. But this model will never succeed in addressing Other *jouissance*, and thus "the inadequacy of the model of phallic masculine sexuality presents man with a positive balance of inexhaustible female *jouissance* that terrifies him."²⁴⁹ Rather than relieve man's uneasiness regarding this female power and female challenge, the attempt to deny Other *jouissance* will always increase masculine unease—for man's "increased will to mastery" over the Other *jouissance* will always fail, (imprisoned as it is within the limiting phallic model), thus "finish[ing] itself off in violence."²⁵⁰

This concept of the attempt to eradicate Other *jouissance* may not be as abstract as it sounds. Benslama cites one manifestation of it: the attempt to preserve and capture virginity. "[I]n the very strict tradition of keeping the hymen intact for the husband...[m]an believes that by this unique unveiling he can access woman once and for all, as if, by entering that intact depth and by removing the immaculate surface, he will succeed in 'consuming' her entirely, with no remainder,"²⁵¹ no excess Other *jouissance* that irks him with his inability to access it for himself. Yet this attempt to contain *jouissance*, to contain woman through a unique penetration of her, only serves to *eliminate* any control man has over the woman: for "in claiming to

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 149.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 150.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 151.

become the master of that loss [of hymen, of virginity], he ends up freeing the woman from preserving the hymen, making her accessible to others. He unveils an unveiling that eliminates any control over the object he aspires to contain absolutely.”²⁵²

But this relationship toward women is a two-part move: it is both the attempt at eradication *and* the repression of that attempt that contribute to the phallic organization of society. Drawing from Freud’s theory, Benslama reminds us that all religions are centered around some sort of repression:

Religions endure and acquire their strength only because they have anchored belief in some region of the abyss, which, through their founder, they have turned into some terrifying originary experience. During a second stage, they repress this experience and conceal the abyss. The founder of Islam proceeds no differently.²⁵³

Here we see echoes of *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*: Islam too, Benslama tells us, can fit into Freud’s schema. Islam, too, is haunted by a repression, and according to his formulation, it is a repression of none other than the central issue stirring up trouble in France today: the veil, the screening of the female body, the attempt to control woman. For by the simple fact of giving birth, woman *is* origin. This coupled with the more complex fact that woman “knows” things as Ruqayya does, things men do not yet or ever know, through different, feminine *jouissance*, endows woman with a power over the masculine order. Woman’s privileged knowledge and her privileged position as originary must at all costs be contained, because the masculine Word, not the Flesh, must assert itself as the origin. But can concealing the Flesh with the hijab effectively conceal this male fear that the origin

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid, 149.

he assumes is in fact always secondary, always a substitution of what he has worked to cover up?

Benslama suggests that we unearth this eradication, repressed as it is by the phallic organization of society. Like Freud, he proposes that we can glean information through traces of the central element being repressed: rather than reduce Islam to Muhammad's "sexual behavior, to his wives, or to the political sociology of his matrimonial relationships, all of which fall within the jurisdiction of the veiling of the abyss and eradication," we must look to what comes before the veil—to the question of female *jouissance* that introduces itself through Hagar and inscribes itself in the Islamic tradition through the scene of demonstration between Muhammad, Gabriel and Khadija. Therefore, as opposed to examining current sociological trends or treatment of women that occurs *after* this originary moment, Benslama suggests that in order to fully understand the object of repression at the core of Islam, we must hone in on this moment itself, "read[ing] this eradication in terms of the specific position of the founder and his experience, where the enigma of female *jouissance* is tied to the fate of the Arabs through their ancestral mother."²⁵⁴ It is this specific doctrinal analysis that Benslama vests with the power to deliver us from the confusion that surrounds the crisis of the veil today—yet it is not just any old analysis, but a *psychoanalysis*, that has this capacity. In fact, this is Benslama's hypothesis in his article *La repudiation originaire*²⁵⁵: "psychoanalysis, if it manages

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ See Fethi Benslama, "La repudiation originaire," *Idiomes, Nationalités, Déconstructions, Rencontre de Rabat avec Jacques Derrida* (Casablanca: Editions Toubkal, 1998).

to take root in the Muslim world, might serve to defeat, undo, or deconstruct this system, and particularly the repression of the feminine that it establishes.”²⁵⁶

MAINTAINING THE PROHIBITION OF A PROHIBITION: ROUDINESCO ON THE VEIL

Though not everyone in France is writing or crediting texts as psychoanalytically complex as Benslama’s *La Psychanalyse à l’épreuve de l’Islam*²⁵⁷, the psychoanalytic perspective is not limited to the academy alone. Here, John Bowen’s idea of *la pensée unique* seems applicable: recall that the psychoanalytic community in France exerts an influence on the production of public opinion in France in a way that it does not in the U.S. Consequently, we find the orientations or ideas of intellectual writings distilled into television programs, popular writings, indeed into the entire mediascape. Often public intellectuals are closely connected to those writing about public affairs, politicians and television figures, and as Bowen points out, sometimes they are even one and the same person. This is what we see in the case of Élisabeth Roudinesco: a psychoanalyst and academic historian at Université Paris VII, Roudinesco is a devout Freudian, who was a member of the École Freudienne de Paris (founded by Lacan), and has written a history of psychoanalysis in France, to which I refer elsewhere in this thesis. But Roudinesco, French public intellectual that she is, routinely airs her political views through public

²⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, Élisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow...: A Dialogue*, Trans. Jeff Fort, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 196, footnote #61. Henceforth “Derrida or Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*.”

²⁵⁷ This is the original French title of *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*.

forums and has contributed to French national newspapers such as *Libération* (1986-1996) and *Le Monde* (since 1996).

Therefore, an analysis of an article Roudinesco published in 2003, entitled *Le foulard à l'école, étouffoir de l'altérité*, allows us to see how the psychoanalytic mode of thinking and scholarship trickles into the public realm of political ideas. This article was published on the website of an activist organization called “*Le Manifeste des libertés*,” or “The Manifesto of Freedoms.” Founded in 2004, the group identifies itself as standing in opposition to Islamic fundamentalism. An excerpt of their manifesto reads as follows:

l'Islam est aujourd'hui, et pour quelque temps encore, un lieu qui cristallise dans le monde globalisé nombre de ses périls : fascisme identitaire et emprise totalitaire, guerres civiles et coloniales, despotismes et dictatures, inégalité et injustice, haine de soi et haine de l'autre, au milieu de violences politiques, religieuses et économiques extrêmes. À ces forces de destruction, dont ce lieu est à la fois la source et la cible, nous voulons nous opposer par une action publique, ouverte à toute personne, sans distinction de naissance ou d'appartenance, qui souscrit aux engagements que nous considérons comme nécessaires, afin d'ouvrir un nouvel horizon à l'espoir ; [Islam is today, and has been for some time, a site that crystallizes in the globalized world many of its characteristic perils: identitarian fascism and totalitarian influence, civil and colonial wars, despotism and dictatorship, inequality and injustice, self-hatred and hatred of the other, in the midst of political violence, religious and economic extremes. We want to oppose these destructive forces, the site of which is both the source and target, through public action, open to all people, without distinction of birth or belonging, who subscribe to commitments that we consider necessary in order to open a new horizon of hope.]²⁵⁸

The rhetoric here conveys urgency—this is a time of crisis, of “destructive forces”, and the time to address these forces is now. The same tone of contemporary peril we saw driving the texts of Benslama and Kristeva is also the backdrop for Roudinesco’s

²⁵⁸ “Texte de fondation de l’Association du Manifeste des libertés”, written 17 December 2004, accessed 13 April 2012, http://www.manifeste.org/article.php3?id_article=113, my translation.

theorizing. But here the political implications of the psychoanalyst's writing are more overt: she is published by and for a group that calls for "public action."

Roudinesco's article, though published by *Manifeste des Libertés*, is not specifically about fundamentalism but about the need to ban the veil from public schools. Written on the heels of "*l'affaire du voile*" of 2003, when the media reported extensively on the exclusion of two young headscarved girls named Alma and Lila Levy, Roudinesco's article comes in response to arguments for keeping the veil in school, and is part of a larger discourse monopolized by the leading editorials and opinion makers of the press, most of whom "with very few exceptions, accepted a monolithic interpretation of the headscarf as the signifier of an aggressive Islamism that challenges the most basic rules of republican coexistence."²⁵⁹ Media coverage from this period a decade ago generally perpetuated a negative view of both veiling and the Islam that advocated it.

Roudinesco begins her brief article by announcing that recently a number of intellectuals and members of *laïque* or feminist associations announced that they were in favor of full headscarves being allowed in schools. She makes it clear that her position is in opposition to these intellectuals, whose "unreasonable" rhetoric in their call for veils in the public space she simply cannot understand:

Que je sache, la France d'aujourd'hui ne mène plus de guerre coloniale, elle n'est pas vichyste et elle n'est menacée d'aucune loi d'exception ;
[What I know is that France today is no longer leading a colonial war, France is not Vichy-ist and France is not threatened by any emergency law]²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ Elver, *The Headscarf*, 120.

²⁶⁰ Élisabeth Roudinesco, « Le foulard à l'école, étouffoir de l'altérité », *Libération*, no. 6853, 27 mai 2003, my translation. Henceforth "Roudinesco, *Le foulard*."

Here, Roudinesco presumably responds to those who have drawn similarities between a France with veil-bans to a France of Vichy times, or a colonial France engaged in war against its Muslim subjects.

*Selon cette perspective, les écolières voilées seraient en passe de devenir les 'boucs émissaires' d'un Etat fondé sur une idéologie sécuritaire ; [According to this perspective, veiled students are becoming the 'scapegoats' of a state founded on a security ideology].*²⁶¹

Roudinesco posits that this argumentation is flawed, and its portrayal of France as a security state, exaggerated. She adds that the liberal and republican right has already radically refused Le Pen's theses to the extent that casting France as Vichy-ist is ludicrous.

But rather than simply articulate the often cited argument that *laïcité* is a value integral to the *République* and to the public school system, Roudinesco explores *why* such a value matters:

*Désiré ou choyé, normalisé ou placé dans des institutions spécialisées, l'enfant — et plus tard l'adolescent — est devenu un sujet à part entière, valorisé dans son désir et sa sexualité depuis la découverte freudienne de l'inconscient ; [Liked or pampered, normalized or placed in a special institution, the child—and later the adolescent—became a full-fledged subject, valorized in his desire and his sexuality since the Freudian discovery of the unconscious] .*²⁶²

This line of argumentation is an interesting one: the notion that adolescents and children acquired a certain space in occidental society in the second half of the nineteenth century thanks to the “Freudian discovery of the unconscious,” is a more specifically psychoanalytic version of the progressivist narrative of Western Enlightenment than one often encounters. But importantly for Roudinesco, what is involved in the acquisition of subjectivity and selfhood for the Western adolescent is

²⁶¹ Ibid, my translation.

²⁶² Ibid, my translation.

his realization of his right to rebellion—so long as such rebellion does not manifest itself in physical violence. She elaborates here:

Aussi [l'enfant ou l'adolescent] lui reconnaît-on un formidable droit à la rébellion, à condition toutefois que celui-ci se manifeste par la parole plutôt que par des passages à l'acte, des saccages, des violences ou des atteintes à l'intégrité corporelle de qui que ce soit. Et c'est bien parce que l'enfant a acquis un tel droit – et donc un tel devoir de ne pas se livrer à des brutalités physiques – que l'on dénonce aussi, à juste titre, les abus dont il est la victime ; [Also he [the child or teenager] recognized within himself a formidable right to rebellion, always on the condition that it manifested itself in words rather than in action, vandalization, violence or violations of the physical integrity of anyone. And this is because the child acquired such a right and therefore—such a duty not to engage in physical brutality—that one denounces also, rightly, the abuses of which he is the victim.]²⁶³

This right to non-verbal rebellion, to emancipation, is a crucial step in a child's pedagogy, one that Roudinesco believes the school plays a central role in imparting. This recognition of subjectivity and the rights that come with it mean two things: firstly, "l'école n'est plus centrée sur un élève idéalisé auquel on devrait enseigner un savoir universel sans prendre en compte sa 'différence' subjective ; [the school is no longer centered around the ideal student to whom one must teach a universal knowledge without taking into account his subjective 'difference']"²⁶⁴. But the concept of accounting for subjective difference is intertwined, in this schema, with this right to emancipation—a right that is trampled should the veil, a symbol of the *rejection* of difference as opposed to an acceptance of it, be allowed on school premises. Thus the recognition of subjectivity and the right to emancipation that are such formative aspects of a student's experience in school cannot happen should the very prohibitions on which the school is founded be violated:

²⁶³ Ibid, my translation.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, my translation.

[l'école] ne doit pas se transformer en un centre d'accueil où seraient transgressés certains des interdits sur lesquels se fonde son autorité : rejet de la violence, limitation de la toute-puissance individuelle, restriction de l'emprise religieuse ou « ethnique ». Parce qu'elle doit conduire chaque sujet à s'émanciper, non pas de l'histoire de ses origines, mais de la contrainte que représente le repli identitaire, l'école moderne a pour mission de demeurer un lieu conflictuel, marqué autant par le principe d'une puissance souveraine \neg fût-elle toujours contestée \neg que par l'exercice d'une liberté critique \neg fût-elle sans cesse soumise à des interdits ; [school should not turn into a center where certain prohibitions on which its authority relies are violated: rejection of violence, limitation of personal omnipotence, restriction of religious or ethnic influence. Because it must lead each individual to emancipate him or herself, not of the history of his or her origins that represents isolationism, the modern school has a mission to remain a place of conflict, marked as much by the principle of sovereign power—always contested—as by the exercise of critical freedom—albeit constantly subjected to prohibitions.]²⁶⁵

It turns out that part of what needs to be emancipated for Roudinesco is *not*, she notes, the history of a person's origins, but “the constraint of isolationism”—presumably produced by the veil. It is difficult to conceive of how one could retain the history of his or her origins while removing the very mark of them (the veil), or in some cases, while failing to adhere to a familial or religious precept. But as we read on, we learn that Roudinesco's emancipatory goal is also one specific to the female.

She reminds us that

A cet égard, les partisans du port du foulard oublient que celui-ci est moins le signe d'une appartenance religieuse que le symbole d'un rejet de l'altérité qui va à l'encontre du principe de mixité et d'égalité propre à l'école républicaine ; [In this respect, those in support of the veil forget that it is less a religious sign than it is a symbol of a rejection of otherness that goes against the principle of diversity and equality of the school of the republic.]²⁶⁶

In this description of the veil, we hear echoes of Benslama: not simply a religious *sign*, as Benslama stressed as well, the veil is symbol of the rejection of otherness—or as Benslama would put it, a rejection of and attempt to eradicate Other *jouissance*.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, my translation.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, my translation.

Armed with this distilled thesis of Benslama's complex Lacanian theory of Islam's central repression²⁶⁷, Roudinesco reaches the logical conclusion that a school founded on the principle of diversity and equality must reject any rejection of such principles. Because, as the argument goes, the French school, and for that matter, the French republic, is against the rejection of otherness, it must reject the veil. Rejections of alterity themselves deserve rejection.

But the most telling aspect of Roudinesco's argument is that it goes on to directly apply psychoanalysis—not, as in Benslama, to a Quranic passage, but to a hypothetical Muslim veil wearer attending a French school.

*S'il est donc nécessaire, pour interdire le port du foulard à l'école, de réaffirmer le principe d'une laïcité excluant tous les autres signes ostentatoires de la religion, cela ne doit pas faire oublier que le fameux hijab auquel tiennent tant les signataires de l'Appel du 20 mai porte en lui la trace d'une emprise corporelle qui a de fortes chances d'enfermer les élèves musulmanes dans un redoutable clivage identitaire. Studieuses à l'école, tout en étant silencieusement reliées par leur voile à un dieu intérieur fanatisé, qui entrave leur liberté de jugement, elles risquent de demeurer étrangères au contenu principal du savoir qu'on leur enseigne et de n'en retenir que les aspects utilitaires ou techniques : quelque chose comme une science sans conscience ; [If it is therefore necessary, to prohibit the wearing of headscarves in school, to reaffirm the principle of *laïcité* excluding all other ostentatious signs of religion, that should not make us forget that the famous *hijab* supported by the signers of the Call of May 20 carries in it a trace of bodily control that will likely imprison Muslim students in a formidable identity split. Studious in school, while silently connected by their veil to a fanatic god within, who impedes their freedom of judgment, they risk remaining estranged from the principal content they are taught and retaining only the utilitarian or technical aspects: something like a science without conscience.]²⁶⁸*

Part of the process of emancipation apparently involves emancipating oneself specifically from God—in this case, not just any God, but the *wrong* kind of God, a

²⁶⁷ Though Roudinesco does not cite Benslama directly in this particular article, she does note the hypothesis of *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* in a footnote within *For What Tomorrow*, published in 1998. See Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, footnote #61.

²⁶⁸ Roudinesco, *Le foulard*, my translation.

“fanatical” God that impedes freedom of judgment. The emancipation here is about casting off a religious yoke; we can hear echoes of Freud’s original calls to “grow up” and out of religion, as can we hear the triumphant secular claims of the Enlightenment. Students attached to their inner fanatical God will only learn through French education in a rote, utilitarian way—the implication is that with such a God governing their subjectivities, they cannot possibly grow into the feeling humanists France aims to create through its schools. Recall that for Roudinesco, it is the Freudian discovery of the unconscious that emancipates us, allowing us to appreciate individual and diverse subjectivity in the first place. So according to her formulation, one is left wondering: if the practice of veiling is here thought to impede emancipation, is psychoanalysis then fundamentally incompatible with Islam?

SEXULARISM: DECONSTRUCTING SECULARISM AND GENDER EQUALITY

In her chapter, “Sexularism” from her volume titled *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, Joan Wallach Scott, who has written extensively on the veil, offers a helpful new perspective on secularism and gender equality, illuminating the assumptions that underlie many of the arguments about the females in Islam that we have encountered so far. As this thesis explores specifically French arguments, it is important to note that Scott is writing outside of France, uninfluenced by the production of the type of *pensée unique* I have discussed elsewhere. While several arguments have come from France about the American overreliance on cultural sensitivity (formerly dubbed “political correctness”)²⁶⁹, we may wonder if in fact it is ever really possible to view

²⁶⁹ See Roudinesco’s remarks in *For What Tomorrow*, 26.

the French situation with any distance and perspective from within the confines of the country—whether perhaps Scott’s perspective is helpful precisely by virtue of its non-Frenchness. Though being American may afford Scott a necessary critical distance, she is certainly intimately familiar with France: along with Robert Darnton and Robert Paxton, she is one of the three leading historians of France of her generation.

The title of Scott’s essay was, in fact, a typographical error: in typing “secularism” her finger consistently slipped to the “x” and the word on the screen appeared as “sexularism.” “So I wondered, thinking of Freud,” Scott tells us, “if this wasn’t a message from the unconscious, a slip of the finger if not of the tongue,”²⁷⁰ an indication of the strange entanglement of sexuality in the recent invocations of the secular. Scott draws out the issue she will go on to destabilize:

The most frequent assumption is that secularism encourages the free expression of sexuality, and that it thereby ends the oppression of women because it removes transcendence as the foundation for social norms and treats people as autonomous individuals, pleasure-seeking agents capable of crafting their own destiny. In substituting imperfect human initiative for the unquestioned truth of divine will, we are told, secularism broke the hold of traditionalism and ushered in the democratic modern age.²⁷¹

Here Scott puts her finger on a trope we saw present in Roudinesco’s article, that of secularism, of the Freudian discovery of the unconscious ushering in the democratic modern age. Of course, Roudinesco does not explicitly state that she is assuming this logic, but certainly the “emancipation” she associates with the modern democratic, *secular* state relies on just that correlation which Scott here illustrates.

²⁷⁰ Scott, *The Fantasy*, 91.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

That the secularist narrative depends on an assumption of freedom—not just from religion, but from oppression generally, particularly the oppression of females—is an argument that has recently been taken up by others. As Tracy Fessenden notes in her essay “Disappearances: Race, Religion, and the Progress Narrative of U.S. Feminism,”

the presumed freedom of women in secularized contexts and the presumed oppression of women in religious contexts is regularly invoked, even by those who care little about or for women’s rights...to underwrite a hierarchy of progress that places supposedly backwards religions at one end of the civilizing scale and the democratic freedoms at the other.²⁷²

Scott’s thesis aligns with this sentiment: secularism comes up frequently in discussions of Islam, which is cast as being at odds with modernity, as opposed to secularism itself, which functions most often as “the unquestioned standard of judgment. It is taken to be an idea, either timeless or evolving, that signifies a universal project of human emancipation specifically including woman.”²⁷³ When primordial values dating back to the French Revolution are those viewed as at stake in *l’affaire du voile*, the emphasis shifts quickly to “the plight of women” wearing the headscarves.²⁷⁴ Thus Scott sets out to question the oppositions so often assumed in our discourse on religion and secularism—oppositions such as “modern/traditional, secular/religious, sexually liberated/sexually oppressed, gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy,” and “West/East.”²⁷⁵ Scott approaches these culturally ingrained and often uninterrogated binaries by providing a history of secularization in which she argues,

²⁷² Tracy Fessenden, “Disappearances: Race, Religion, and the Progress Narrative of U.S. Feminism,” *Secularisms*, edited by Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 139.

²⁷³ Scott, *The Fantasy*, 91.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 93.

first, that the equal status of women and men was not in fact inherently or causally connected to the movement to separate church and state, and next by questioning the assumed individual agency present in the discussion of secularism. Finally, through the deployment of a psychoanalytic perspective, she demonstrates that secularism has not resolved the difficulties that sexual difference poses for social and political organizations. The crux of her argument is that,

not only is there no necessary connection between them [secularism and gender equality], but that the equality that secularism promises has always been troubled by sexual difference, by the difficult—if not impossible—task of assigning ultimate meaning to bodily differences between men and women. Those who insist on the superiority of secularism compared to religion, as if the two categories were in eternal opposition rather than discursively interdependent, tell a story of the evolution of modernity.²⁷⁶

Like Talal Asad, and drawing on his theory, Scott calls for a critique of the idealized secular that so often functions as an oppositional force in the discussion of (and in the construction of, one could argue) Islam. But there is a link here to sex, to the passions of the female; “because secularization in the Christian lands of the West proceeds by defining religion as a matter of private conscience, in the same way and at the same time that it privatizes familial and sexual matters.”²⁷⁷ Passion is then assigned to the body of the female, in opposition to which a reasonable, incorporeal masculinity can construct itself. Woman, however, has the reproductive function and can thus never be abstracted from the bodily, sexual material realm and into the rational one of men. Though the public/private distinction is but “an arbitrary boundary requiring constant regulation by state authorities,”²⁷⁸ it is crucial in its demarcation of the secular/religious divide, which in turn “rested on a vision of

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 96.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

sexual difference that legitimized the political and social inequality of women and men.”²⁷⁹ These constructed demarcations crystallize even further through the feminization of religion. Increasingly, feminine religion became an entity apart from feminine sexuality, though the threat it posed to rational political order is a similar one, because like most things feminine, it was viewed as “excessive, transgressive, and dangerous.”²⁸⁰

Therefore, Scott posits, the causal connection we are so inclined to make between sexual emancipation for females and secularism is completely misguided, and, as she documents, historically unfounded—in many cases the mode of discourse surrounding these issues is simply noncoincidental with the reality of the time, as for example, “well before women won the vote in France, descriptions of life in North Africa stressed the superiority of French gender relations compared to those of the Arabs.”²⁸¹ Another example lies in the headscarf: the discourse in France would lead one to believe that no woman who wears one does so through any individual agency, while for women in organizations such as *Collectif des Féministes pour l’Egalité*, maintaining the freedom to *choose* whether they would even like to wear a headscarf in the first place is essential to preserving rights of freedom and choice in how they present their bodies. While, of course, not all women who wear the veil do so of their own volition, it is possible to interrogate the agency attributed to the Western woman’s choices as well: is the woman who must wear the veil for a man or for society so different from the “women who feel pressured by boyfriends or husbands

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 97.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 98.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 103.

to conform to the dictates of Western fashion, or—to take an extreme example—from prostitutes forced by their pimps to wear miniskirts and heavy makeup?”²⁸² In both cases there is a wide array of possible motivations behind a woman’s choice in clothing—and often, though Scott herself does not account for this, motivations are not singular, but combine to socially condition the female who then makes the choices that she does. From this perspective, the assignment of just a single meaning, a single symbol to veil wearing appears for what it truly is: an utterly futile exercise.

“Agency, then,” Scott reasons,

is not the innate property of an abstract individual, but the attribute of subjects who are defined by—subjected to—discourses that bring them into being as both subordinate and capable of action. It follows that religious belief does not in itself deny agency; rather, it creates particular forms of agency whose meanings and history are not transparently signaled by the wearing of a veil.²⁸³

Thus, as opposed to viewing secularism and religion as antithetical in their positions on agency and sexual difference, we need to instead conceptualize them as offering two different “framework[s] within which to address the problem that sexual difference seems to pose for modern subjects.”²⁸⁴

Could it be that psychoanalysis is this very framework? Scott seems to think so. “In this area [of the relationship between sexual difference and the structure of meaning it creates for secularism], the observations of psychoanalysis—which is, after all, a critical commentary on the rationalism of the secular—are useful,” Scott asserts; “Indeed, it might be argued that the best theorizing we have of sexuality and sexual subjectivity in modern secular societies occurs in the writings of Freud and his

²⁸² Ibid, 111.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 112.

followers.”²⁸⁵ In this respect, Scott’s view finds common ground with those of her French contemporaries: like Benslama, Kristeva, and Roudinesco, she too believes Freudian thought to be the best lens through which to explore the relationship between the secular and the religious (so often cast as a “clash”) today.

Scott claims that “the enigma of sexual difference is at the heart of psychoanalytic theory,” particularly that of Lacan, who assumes that “psychic identities do not correspond to anatomical bodies,” that assignments of masculinity and femininity fail to align neatly with our biological conceptions of gender.²⁸⁶ Instead, masculine and feminine subjects are defined by their relationships to the phallus, which signifies desire in Lacanian theory, or the impossible wish to recover the loss and fill the lack that occurs in the initial separation from the parent and the acquisition of language. For men, the relationship to this desire tends to take the form of castration, to the lack imposed on him by the prohibition of his desire to commit incest and sleep with his mother. However, there is always hope for man that he will be an exception to the castration; because the symbolic father is subject to his own law, this offers proof that there exists a masculine figure who escapes castration. The female, meanwhile, assumes that she is already castrated and therefore does not react to prohibitions or identify with the exception of the symbolic father as the man does. This means that while she does not partake in man’s desire to attain full presence, to fill the lack created by castration, “she is animated by desire, and this is articulated in relation to the phallus—but not entirely. Lacan posits another *jouissance* for women that, at least partly ‘escapes the reign of the phallus,’ but this is not generalizable in

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 113.

the way the male exception is.”²⁸⁷ Here is the same Other *jouissance* that we saw was central for Benslama, but rather than go on to explore its enigmatic qualities as he does, Scott remarks upon the fact that its very existence means that there is something particular about the female: the Other *jouissance* of the female defies simple definition in relation to the signifier of “phallus” (or any signifier at all), while man’s relationship to desire is universal. Does this connect in some way, Scott wonders, to the secular concepts of masculinity assigned to the public while femininity is confined to the private?

This type of exploration leads Scott to formulate questions that might allow us to move beyond the typical emancipatory narrative so often told about secularism and gender equality—a story, we might notice, present in the logic of Roudinesco’s article. Such questions include “...is gender equality, paradoxically, undermined by psychic processes associated with secularism, which insist on the irreconcilable differences between men and women...? What have secularists [even] meant by equality?”²⁸⁸

Scott concludes by clarifying that she is not arguing that secular and religious societies and discourses treat women no differently than one another—of course they do, and of course such differences matter and have consequences for those living in these societies. What she is questioning, however, is “to what extent...the differences [are] a matter of ‘secularism’ or ‘religion,’” as “when looked at historically, it is clear that the differences are not always as sharp as contemporary debates suggest,” that in fact “the sharpness of the distinction works to obscure the continuing problems

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 114.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 115.

evident in so-called secular societies by attributing all that is negative to religion.”²⁸⁹

Scott’s chapter serves as a delightful destabilization of the discourse “that takes sexual emancipation to be the fruit of secularism”²⁹⁰—a discourse located in a particular historical context “in which the hyperbolic language of a ‘clash of civilizations’ and a ‘crisis’ of secularism has come to characterize what ought to be more-nuanced discussions about the complex relationships within and between Islam and the West.”²⁹¹

Certainly such “hyperbolic discourse” is present in several, if not all, of the psychoanalytic arguments on Islam that we have encountered thus far. But do all of them tacitly assume sexual emancipation to be “the fruit of secularism”? Such a claim would require further, closer inquiry. If, in fact, we find that these arguments do operate within the common narrative that imagines or invents a correspondence between sexual liberty and secularism, does that invalidate them? Must we question the way in which they distinguish the religious from the secular (which often functions as an implicit and invisible category through which we can relate to the religious)? Part of what Scott’s text accomplishes is the questioning of the border between the religious and the secular, thus “revealing its conceptual interdependence and the political work that it does.”²⁹² We, then, are left with the question of what sort of “political work” Scott is referring to—what motivates it, and what exactly is its

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 101.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid, 116. Note that Scott is far from the only one to take up a discussion of the political work involved in constructing and maintaining the border between the religious and the secular; Asad, Anidjar, and others have devoted scholarship to the destabilizing of these co-dependent entities and the questioning of their hegemonic and political power.

end goal (albeit perhaps an unconscious one) in the case of the psychoanalytic texts we have explored on Islam?

CHAPTER THREE

US VS. THEM: THE TENDENCY TOWARD THE BINARY

“What is it to treat a culture, to diagnose a religion? What protocols of explanation, identification and prescription are implicated in formulating and answering questions of the kind: ‘what went wrong with Islam?’ This is not an innocent question...and the reasons for its ideological ubiquity are not difficult to glean. But what are the stakes when the one who asks such a question is not an Orientalist historian, or an imperial pundit, but a psychoanalyst, or at least someone drawing analytical insight and speculative authority from Freud or Lacan?”

--Alberto Toscano²⁹³

THIRTY YEARS AFTER *ORIENTALISM*: HOW FAR HAVE WE COME?

The psychoanalytic discourse surrounding the supposed “crisis” inspired by the intersection of secularism and Islam in France provokes the question: is there “political work,” to borrow Scott’s term, operating in the texts of Kristeva, Roudinesco and Benslama? Here, a closer look into the text that initially illuminated the political work involved in discussions of the Orient will be useful. In his tour de force, *Orientalism* (1978), Saïd coined his titular term. While “Orientalism” had previously been used to refer to a specific form of scholarship on the Orient, Saïd’s term encompasses more than work done in the academy. Most fundamentally, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”²⁹⁴—a distinction that rarely favors the former. Saïd’s book traces this style of thought,

²⁹³ Alberto Toscano, “Fanaticism as Fantasy: Notes on Islam, Psychoanalysis & Political Philosophy”, *Umbria: A Journal of the Unconscious* 2009, 105. Henceforth “Toscano, *Fanaticism as Fantasy*.”

²⁹⁴ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 2.

beginning with the eighteenth century,²⁹⁵ and moving through the production of texts both literary and scholarly in the twentieth century, focusing on the two colonial hubs of Britain and France, before elaborating on the more recent form of American Orientalism. He aims to show how “the Orient that appears in Orientalism...is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire.”²⁹⁶

This system of representing the Orient, whether in an explicitly negative or exoticized and idealized instantiation, *translates the foreign into a controllable object of study or acquisition*. This argument is especially potent for our purposes as we go on to consider the contemporary French attempt to *translate the foreign into psychoanalytic terms*, into an object of study, and thereby, in a Foucauldian sense, an object of acquisition.²⁹⁷ Though the exact qualities associated with the Orient may change, the view of the Orient as *translatable object* persists, as does the consensus on both the Orient and its most oft-mentioned element, Islam: both are characterized by “latent inferiority.”²⁹⁸ The central argument around which Orientalism developed is “the myth of the arrested development of the Semites,” a myth begun by philologists in the nineteenth century and taken up and transformed by a slew of social scientists in the twentieth century who, working from within this matrix of knowledge, “pour forth [other myths], each of them showing the Semite to be the

²⁹⁵ It is important to note that Saïd does not consider the eighteenth century to be the indisputable origin point of Orientalism; he chooses it as a point from which to begin tracing the phenomenon in his book though he acknowledges that the forces propelling its existence had to have begun even earlier in history.

²⁹⁶ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 203.

²⁹⁷ We can never forget the Foucauldian notion that knowledge is power, and the project of making something *knowable* is never entirely divorced from the project of obtaining power over it.

²⁹⁸ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 204.

opposite of the Westerner and irremediably the victim of his own weaknesses.”²⁹⁹

From this reified structure of myths about the Orient, Saïd identifies four dogmas of Orientalism—four dogmas that we can search for in the contemporary texts psychoanalyzing Islam:

...one is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a ‘classical’ Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically ‘objective.’ A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared...or to be controlled.³⁰⁰

This chapter goes on to investigate whether these dogmas continue to emerge in the contemporary texts written in France that endeavor to psychoanalyze Islam.

However, it is important that we realize that Orientalism is not just a set of views about the Orient, but is produced through a full-fledged *process*. Most important to Saïd’s concept, and indeed, for my own project, is Foucault’s notion of discourse, of the institution that produces and regulates the scientific, literary, and political thought on that amorphous territory called the Orient. “The interchange between the academic and the more or less imaginative meanings of Orientalism is a constant one,” Saïd tells us, “and since the late eighteenth century there has been a considerable, quite disciplined—perhaps even regulated—traffic between the two.”³⁰¹

Saïd contends that without examining Orientalism as a *discourse*,

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 307.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 300-301.

³⁰¹ Ibid, 3.

one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. This is not to say that Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when the peculiar entity ‘the Orient’ is in question.³⁰²

But this European mechanism of speaking and thinking about the Orient was not just about defining ‘the Orient.’ Saïd attempts to show that in producing the Orient, Europe was indeed also producing *itself*—that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”³⁰³ This, remember, is the same sort of process of self-production that Scott identifies in the French objectification of Muslims, which serve as a culture against which France defines itself as an enduring Republic.³⁰⁴

But just as France and Islam are clearly more than mythical fictions, “it would be wrong to conclude that the Orient [or the Occident] was *essentially* an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality,” as “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied.”³⁰⁵ *Understanding the Orient and the Occident means understanding a relationship of unbalanced power, a relationship historically constituted by varying degrees of domination.* As we will see, this historical relationship of domination in many ways continues to shape the terrain of

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ See Scott, *Politics of the Veil*, 7, or the discussion of this idea on page 15 of this thesis.

³⁰⁵ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 5.

discourse³⁰⁶ about Islam in Europe today. Such a relationship is produced through a hegemonic circulation of ideas, through the incestuous referencing of particular Western textual authorities. Thus, “one ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths, which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away”³⁰⁷—rather the “myths” meld with political reality into something as concrete as mortar, so that “what we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted-together strength of Orientalist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability.”³⁰⁸ This, I argue, is what we must try to grasp as we examine French academic discourse, reflective and productive of a French *pensée unique* that enables socio-economic and political institutions. Thought, when it exists as such a knitted-together discourse, has material consequences.

So too is Orientalism’s existence is enabled—if not, in fact, created—by “a considerable material investment”³⁰⁹ in both its theory and practice. For none can forget that the textual version of the Orient produced by centuries of European authors and scholars was bred before, during, and after much of the space called the Orient was being physically annexed and ruled by Britain, and, important for our purposes, by France. Orientalism, the mode of thinking about and interacting with the Orient, is tied up in a history of colonialism and imperialism. Money, time, and

³⁰⁶ The relationship of domination that I describe here does not unequivocally shape the terrain of discourse, however, and the extent of the hegemony Saïd identifies as at work in the nineteenth century has certainly lessened its hold in various contexts. No longer is it possible to state quite as generally that all of Europe’s relationships with Islam are filtered through blind hegemony.

³⁰⁷ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 6.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

people were funneled into this project of physical and intellectual exploration of the Orient and its cultural products. It was this “continued [material] investment [that] made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness;”³¹⁰ an academic perspective leaked into the ‘ground water,’ the unexamined assumptions of general culture. If we remember Gramsci’s term *cultural hegemony*, as Saïd does, we can better comprehend the latter’s argument: in a non-totalitarian society, one group can come to dominate, such that it is their cultural views which win out as the reigning and accepted social norm. Such a hegemony, woven by scholarly, literary, and political authorities, is what fuels Orientalism, what provides both its strength and durability—such that, as much as one huffs and puffs, the structure of thought about the Orient cannot simply be blown away. Nor can the force of Orientalism be underestimated:

As a discipline representing institutionalized Western knowledge of the Orient, Orientalism thus comes to exert a three-way force, on the Orient, on the Orientalist, and on the Western ‘consumer’ of Orientalism. It would be wrong, I think, to underestimate the strength of the three-way relationship thus established...the Orient is thus Orientalized, a process that...forces the uninitiated Western reader to accept Orientalist codifications...as the true Orient.³¹¹

For Orientalism’s power resides in “its internal, repetitious consistency about its constitutive will-to-power over the Orient.” It was this process that allowed it not just to survive, but to thrive, throughout centuries of “revolutions, world wars, and literal dismemberment of empires.”³¹² So powerful was Orientalism, particularly in its heyday of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that Saïd claims

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid, 67.

³¹² Ibid, 222.

no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism...[by] the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity 'the Orient' is in question.³¹³

Yet Saïd's point is not that the Western knowledge of the East misrepresents some *true* essence, some reality that actually characterizes the people, religion, and customs of the Orient. No such Oriental essence exists for Saïd. Instead, his criticism of Orientalism is that "it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting."³¹⁴ The representation of the Orient functions such that "the Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert"—meaning that "the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself."³¹⁵ Knowledge of the Orient became credible only after it had passed through the sites of production of specialized Orientalist "fact," through an institution imbued with the alleged ability to understand what was foreign and exotic to the rest of the population.

We will examine this notion later in this chapter in relationship to Benslama, whose Tunisian status and intimate knowledge of the Quran and Hadith should be license enough to credit him as a source of authentic knowledge about (at least a part of) the Orient. Instead, his knowledge is filtered through a particular institution "with the alleged ability to understand what was foreign and exotic to the rest of the population"—the institution of psychoanalysis. In the nineteenth century, as the other humanities and social sciences developed, Saïd contends that the scholarly branch

³¹³ Ibid, 3.

³¹⁴ Ibid, 273.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 283.

called “Orientalism” failed to evolve, remaining stuck in “its general methodological and ideological backwardness, and its comparative insularity from developments...in the real world of historical, economic, social, and political circumstances.”³¹⁶ We can ask whether the same is true of the scholarly branch of psychoanalysis today.

But perhaps the aspect of Saïd’s phenomenon that most visibly operates in contemporary France is Orientalism’s driving force: “a fairly constant sense of confrontation felt by Westerners dealing with the East.”³¹⁷ Though France no longer has footholds in its Oriental colonies, this sense of confrontation continues as the population of Muslim immigrants within France increases. According to a January 2013 survey, 70 percent of the French population believes there are too many foreigners living in the country, and 74 percent believe that Islam is not compatible with French society.³¹⁸ The feeling of confrontation is palpable: 77 percent of France’s residents believe that religious fundamentalism—often associated with Islam—is a concern, and 62 percent reported no longer feeling at home in France.³¹⁹

But it is not only the impetus for Orientalism that persists—the hegemonic structure enabling the practice has not disappeared either. As we have seen, texts on Islam are inter-referential; Roudinesco cites Benslama,³²⁰ Benslama cites Roudinesco,³²¹ and everyone³²² cites Freud. But is “the hegemony of European ideas

³¹⁶ Ibid, 261.

³¹⁷ Ibid, 201.

³¹⁸ Ben McPartland, “‘Too Many Foreigners in France,’ French Say,” *The Local: France’s News in English*, January 25, 2013, accessed April 10, 2013, <http://www.thelocal.fr/page/view/too-many-foreigners-in-france-french-say#.UUOaOhlU0Xx>.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ See Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 196, footnote 61.

³²¹ See Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 203.

about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness”³²³ present in these texts? Do we see evidence that the four dogmas of Orientalism remain an inescapable framework for those writing about Islam in a European context and with the European tool of psychoanalysis? Such questions require a closer look at the texts, one drawing on Saïd’s framework for discerning Orientalism and enlisting the help of Ian Almond, whose book, *The New Orientalists*, delves into the perpetuation of Orientalist thinking in the works of postmodernism.

While a totally comprehensive investigation into an entire system of thought is impossible—both for Saïd, and for myself—the individual author and text play an important role in the production and maintenance of a larger, culturally-ingrained mode of thinking. Thus, though “Foucault believes that...the individual text or author counts for very little; empirically, in the case of Orientalism,” Saïd explains, “I find this not to be so. Accordingly, my analyses employ close textual readings whose goal is to reveal the dialectic between individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which his work is a contribution.”³²⁴ Accordingly, my own close readings of the psychoanalytic texts on Islam being produced in France take on the same aim. “Too often,” Saïd reminds us, “literature and culture are presumed to be apolitical, even historically innocent.”³²⁵ Kristeva, Roudinesco and Benslama are not writing in the context of France’s colonial and imperial glory days; instead, all of them are writing under the duress of a perceived “crisis” within France, as its immigrant population increases and its sense of identity destabilizes. As veil-wearers

³²² By “everyone,” I here refer to the three authors whose texts we have examined: Kristeva, Roudinesco, and Benslama.

³²³ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 7.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid, 27.

fill classrooms within French borders, threatening foundational myths of nationally-esteemed gender equality and *laïcité*, and as France loses its footing as a world power, watching from the sidelines as “Oriental” countries surpass the Hexagon on the global stage, we can ask whether the Saïdian response—the need to define the Western self against the Oriental one—persists. Saïd’s argument in 1978 “takes it that the Orientalist reality is both antihuman and persistent. Its scope, as much as its institutions and all-pervasive influence, lasts up to the present.”³²⁶ The question is now whether the complete Orientalist reality lasts up until *our* present.

KRISTEVA: GOOD RELIGION VERSUS BAD RELIGION

Though, as I pointed out in Chapter One, few reviewers have aired criticisms of Kristeva’s *This Incredible Need*, Ian Almond’s *The New Orientalists* does undertake a critique of Kristeva’s view of Islam as it emerges in some of her earlier texts and interviews.³²⁷ He points out that “a number of critics have expressed reservations concerning the deficit of attention to the political in Kristeva—an abiding warning that too much psychoanalytical focus on the semiotic disruption of the semantic within a text/subject distracts from the material circumstances which engage it.”³²⁸ Indeed, *This Incredible Need* fails to adequately address the current French political situation save for vague, generalizing references to “these times of

³²⁶ Ibid, 44.

³²⁷ Almond’s book was published in 2007, the same year as *Cet Incroyable Besoin de Croire* (This Incredible Need to Believe) was published in French. The English translation of Kristeva’s text was published as recently as 2009; the chronology explains why Almond does not work with this text in his critique of Kristeva.

³²⁸ Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007), 142. Henceforth “Almond, *The New Orientalists*.”

nihilistic distress and its maniacal underside, fundamentalism,”³²⁹ or to “destructive confrontations where regression and the explosion of the death instinct face off...”³³⁰ This is all we ever hear from Kristeva about the circumstances in France today. But the political problems of *This Incredible Need* extend beyond the feasibility of its real-world application. Rather, there is in fact a political force to her text itself, even within the psychoanalysis that appears to be light years away from the realm of political reality.

Kristeva’s argument, as discussed in Chapter One, hinges on the claim that faith is analyzable. “The questioning of any and all entities, including belief and its objects, is one of Christianity’s most impressive legacies,” she maintains, “and humanism, its rebellious child, must not be prevented from developing this legacy.”³³¹ I would agree with her that the questioning of belief—particularly non-Christian belief—is one of Christianity’s most impressive legacies, one continued by humanism. Yet I must disagree with her contention that such a legacy is impressive in the *positive* sense. Early Christianity’s long, inquisitorial interrogation of non-Christian belief (pagan, Judaic, Muslim) is not my topic here; its heir of Western secularism, however, is. Gil Anidjar’s view of contemporary Western secularism underscores this concept: “secularism and secular criticism are unified practices that continue to function the way Christianity has now done for centuries, give or take more or less important differences, complexities, and whatnot.”³³² In fact, according to Anidjar, not only do Christianity and secular humanism allow us to *analyze*

³²⁹ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 99.

³³⁰ Ibid, 64.

³³¹ Ibid, ix.

³³² Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), Chapter 2: Secularism, 48.

belief³³³ as Kristeva tells us, but “secularism is part of a discourse of power and institutions that are bent on making us *invent* ‘religion,’ making us *cathect* it (positively, or even—one can almost see Freud [and Saint Paul] smiling—*indifferently*), bent on making the knowledge of it desirable.”³³⁴ But this religion that secularism invents and invites us to analyze, as we see it operating in Kristeva’s text, rather than making us recognize religion for what it *is*, mostly focuses on “what it is *not*: Christianity, secularized.”³³⁵ Here we see the forces of European self-production that Saïd describes as inherent to the project of Orientalism, forces that Anidjar attributes to the project of secularism as well.

The self-production continues as Kristeva esteems Christianity, “the history of...[which] is a preparation for humanism. Of course, humanism is in a state of rupture with Christianity, but it starts from it.”³³⁶ Anidjar would agree, calling what Kristeva refers to lovingly as ‘humanism,’ ‘secularism’: “secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented ‘religion,’ [and] named its others as ‘religious.’”³³⁷ Though Kristeva acknowledges secularism’s Christian origins much more readily than do many proponents of secular humanism, her entire text works to differentiate the Christian religion that inspired humanism from the sort of religion that is incompatible with that humanism—the sort that is problematic for modern secularism because, as the argument goes, it fails to offer its adherents a mechanism

³³³ The way in which ‘belief’ comes to stand for ‘religion’ in general is another product of Western, Christian (primarily Protestant) scholarship that has been explored recently by various scholars of the anthropology of religion. See Talal Asad, Daniel Boyarin, Webb Keane, and Jonathan Z. Smith, among others.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid, 48.

³³⁶ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 83.

³³⁷ Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, 48.

through which to properly repress the death drive as Christianity so successfully has. Kristeva considers herself a proponent of belief and religion—so long as it is the right kind:

The discovery of the unconscious by Freud has shown us that, far from being ‘illusions,’ though all the while being illusions, the different beliefs and kinds of spiritualities accommodate, encourage, or make use of precise psychic movements, which allow the human being to become a speaking being, a seat of culture or, inversely, of destructiveness.³³⁸

The Christian belief she so reveres—that which she refers to as “genius” in the title of one of her book’s sections—is the “seat of culture;” it is the bad religion—the non-Christian, *Muslim*, religion—that is the seat of “destructiveness.” Here we see Kristeva’s reliance on the Freudian authority, and yet, as Alberto Toscano points out, Freud thought that *all religion* was an illusion—*not*, as Kristeva seems to posit, “that certain illusions have an emancipatory function which makes them superior to others.”³³⁹

Kristeva goes on to heap praise upon the superior sort of illusion: “Indeed, Christianity is the only religion that addresses suffering ‘intimately’—that tames it—and the culture that comes along with it or after it shows the effects of this.”³⁴⁰ As we may recall from Chapter One, her psychoanalytical argument is that Christianity is able to manage both suffering and destructive impulses because the patricide of Jesus around which the religion is structured allows for the sublimation of its practitioners’ death drives. “The recognition of the right to pain; the sharing of the suffering of others in compassion, by tactful words and even in social activism; and, at the same

³³⁸ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 24.

³³⁹ Toscano, *Fanaticism as Fantasy*, 117.

³⁴⁰ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 81.

time, the revelation of the pleasure ‘that pitiless tormentor’³⁴¹ are all the ways in which Christianity properly handles suffering, “to cite only three possible destinies of suffering, among the many discoveries of the literature of, or inspired by Christianity.”³⁴²

Yet though Kristeva lists way upon way in which Christianity has *dealt with* suffering, she conveniently forgets all the ways in which it has inflicted it.³⁴³ Nor does Kristeva remember Islam’s role in producing the fruits of Christianity’s literature and philosophy: the historical relationship between the West and Islam, the influence of Sufi poetry, of medieval Islamic philosophy, is all discounted as something apart from the Islam Kristeva here distills and separates from Christianity. Though she acknowledges Aristotle’s influence on Islamic philosophy, she claims that while “Aristotelianism attracted Islam...[it] was also a foil for it;”³⁴⁴ the God of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is “very far...from the omnipotence of the Islamic legislator who exacts obedience.”³⁴⁵ Christianity is here purified, read selectively: its Kristevan incarnation appears free of any blemishes, such as an Islamic influence or a history of colonialist domination. “Is this, really, a religion like the rest?” she asks, almost rhetorically, “And to think that some still try to ‘reconcile’ faith and reason, Europe and the third world, freedom and women in veils!”³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ Here Kristeva is citing Baudelaire; Ibid, 81.

³⁴² Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 82.

³⁴³ Almond too is critical of Kristeva’s “selective cultural memory” that he finds present in a different text of hers, entitled *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000). See Almond, *The New Orientalists*, 152.

³⁴⁴ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 65.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 106.

Kristeva views her two forms of religion as totally irreconcilable—as inconceivable in coexistence as “freedom and women in veils!” Here Saïd’s first dogma of Orientalism manifests itself: Kristeva has carved out an “absolute and systematic difference”³⁴⁷ between the developed, humane and superior Western Christianity and its undeveloped, inhumane and inferior Oriental counterpart, Islam. *This Incredible Need* is a fight for the good, Western kind of religion—because it and its offspring (humanism, secularism, and especially, psychoanalysis) may be the only cure for the bad. “Don’t be afraid of Christianity and together we won’t fear religions!’ I find myself wanting to say to my agnostic, humanist, atheist friends,”³⁴⁸ she exclaims. Echoing Martin Luther King, Jr., Kristeva pronounces,

...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.³⁴⁹

But though she speaks of “complicities” between Christianity and “the other religions today tempted by fundamentalism,” Kristeva’s dream takes a turn away from that of the American civil rights activist, focusing less on integration, and certainly much less on lifting up an oppressed class, race, or, indeed, religion. Instead, the opposition between Christianity and that which is written off as responsible for the “rise of barbarity”—as *non-Christian*, as prone to fundamentalism³⁵⁰—comes to undergird

³⁴⁷ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 300.

³⁴⁸ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 106.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Though elsewhere in her text Kristeva actually concedes that “religious fundamentalism does not spare Christianity, of course, and this tendency appears to be fairly widespread in the United States, in a certain neoconservative Protestantism,” (Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*,

her entire logic. “Complicities” between these two ostensibly oppositional cultures begin to appear untenable, and it is instead the complicity between religion and its secular child that Kristeva sees as the viable path to “freedom,” as the solution to France’s woes. The fourth dogma of Orientalism here rears its ugly head: “the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared or...to be controlled”³⁵¹—if we stop fearing Christianity “together we won’t fear religions!” We can either tremble in fear of Islam and its destructive forces, or we can endorse Kristeva’s “vision” and deploy Christian secularism to *control* Islam.

But despite Kristeva’s command not to be afraid of Christianity, perhaps *we should be*. As Anidjar reminds us, “much more than an idea, Christianity is a massive institution, the sum total of philosophical and scientific, economic and political achievements, discursive, administrative, and institutional accomplishments, the singularity and specificity of which are not to be doubted.”³⁵² And it is this Christianity, the one which Kristeva acknowledges inspired the humanism and secularism she believes in so forcefully, that Anidjar unveils as having suddenly dubbed itself “secular” in opposition to its others. For Christianity, according to Anidjar, “*judged* itself no longer Christian, no longer ‘religious.’ Christianity (that is...Western Christendom) judged and named itself, *reincarnated* itself, as ‘secular.’”³⁵³ Once reincarnated, Christianity was able to distinguish itself from other “religions.”

70) she still ultimately adheres to the logic that allows her to differentiate between Christianity and Fundamentalism.

³⁵¹ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 301.

³⁵² Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, 44.

³⁵³ Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, 45.

But when Anidjar claims that Christianity dubbed other faiths and other modes of piety “religion,” he does not mean that this happened in a solely academic or textual way; on the contrary, this invention of “religion” is tied up in colonialism, in structures of imperialism and hegemony. “Colonizing the world since 1492, Christianity slowly granted other communities and traditions, those it exploited or converted, massacred and ‘civilized,’ enslaved and exterminated, new structures of authority and domination,” and with these new structures, “it granted them...the very name of ‘religion.’”³⁵⁴ Anidjar reminds us that Christianity’s history with suffering is not just one of *handling* it, but of creating it—and as it created suffering, Christianity, indeed, *created* religion: “Like that unmarked race, which, in the related discourse of racism, became invisible or ‘white,’ Christianity invented the distinction between religious and secular, and thus it *made* religion.”³⁵⁵ But it did not only make religion—it made religion a problem. “And it made it into an object of criticism that needed to be no less than *transcended*.”³⁵⁶ Anidjar’s description sounds eerily similar to the Christianity we see at work in Kristeva’s text, and to the “bad religion,” that is its “object of criticism.” Kristeva claims, as we will remember from Chapter One, that “psychoanalysis neither explains nor judges; it is content to transform”³⁵⁷—it is content to *transcend* its religious object, transforming it into a more suitable secular variant.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 46.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 47. Anidjar is not alone in this assertion. For more on the construction of religion, both as an imperial and colonial invention in the nineteenth century, and as an anthropological category that persists today, see Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), Webb Keane (2007), Jonathan Z. Smith (1998), and Donald S. Lopez (1998), among many others.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 85.

Equipped with this understanding of Christianity and secularism and their relationship to “bad religion,” we might ask, as Almond does, “to what extent...the Muslim world become[s] the abject other for Kristeva, expelled in order to preserve and maintain the purity of the European subject and its symbolic discourse?”³⁵⁸ Recall from Chapter One that Kristeva associates Islam, Fundamentalism, and adolescence—in fact, for her such terms are conflated to contribute to that amorphous, abstract danger for today’s secular society. And yet Kristeva fails to cite a single Muslim source text; her claims are completely unsubstantiated and non-specific to any type of practicing Muslim. Here she exemplifies the second dogma of Orientalism: that “abstractions about the Orient are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern oriental realities.”³⁵⁹

The Islam Kristeva abstracts is a threatening one. “The French Republic faces a historical challenge,” she announces, “can it deal with the crisis of belief religion no longer keeps the lid on that affects the very foundations upon which human bonds are built?”³⁶⁰ Here we see how French foundations of the social order, presumably Enlightenment-era values of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, come to function as a self-differentiating force against Islam, which is seen as posing a challenge to those very values. The theorist who so aptly deals with our psychoanalytic relationship to the “other,” to the “abject,” here falls prey to the mechanism she is so cognizant of in other works: for the abject is what she identifies as “disturb[ing] identity, system,

³⁵⁸ Almond, *The New Orientalists*, 133.

³⁵⁹ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 300.

³⁶⁰ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 23.

order...What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”³⁶¹ Indeed, Islam’s problematic father structure “handicap[s] a possible opening of Islam toward the ethical and political problems raised by the freedoms...of the men and women of the third millennium;”³⁶² Islam, with its “terrifying, even terroristic, drift of these underlying currents”³⁶³ supposedly inherent in it, does not respect the rules of freedom and disturbs the system of France. Kristeva’s encounter with Islam is traumatic; and like the abject, Islam’s expulsion is necessary for identity construction. Islam “lies outside, beyond the set [in this case, outside the rules of French *laïcité*], and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”³⁶⁴

Kristeva handles the challenge by attempting to abstract it into something manageable, by attempting to assimilate it into the structure of Judeo-Christian patricide and thereby, into the framework of Western Freudianism. But “what exacerbates this very un-Kristevan essentializing is the way Kristeva appears to employ an eighteenth-century strategy of negative affirmation emphasizing the *liberté* of Europe against a despotic and oppressive East.”³⁶⁵ Here we see echoes of Saïd’s Orientalism in this expression of the strength of the West against the Orient’s weakness³⁶⁶: an entire, heterogeneous and constantly-changing tradition is reduced to a problem of fanaticism, while the European nation state is itself read selectively,

³⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 4. Henceforth “Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.”

³⁶² Ibid, 68.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

³⁶⁵ Almond, *The New Orientalists*, 153.

³⁶⁶ For a more elaborate discussion of this feature of Orientalism, see Saïd, *Orientalism*, 44-45.

idealized as a land of supposed gender and religious equality. Hence my agreement with Almond, that

What is objectionable, in the vocabulary of a theorist of Kristeva's caliber, is the absence of sophistication and reflection in her remarks concerning the Muslim world, the blanket dismissive terminology she uses to describe its culture and believers, the remarkable degree to which she has failed to enter into dialogue with the planet's second largest faith, at a time when such sensitivity is precisely what is required.³⁶⁷

In *This Incredible Need*, psychoanalysis leads not to an understanding of the "abject other," but, to the Christian and secular project of *managing* the abject—of abstracting and, indeed, *transforming* Islam in order to produce and reify the borders of a French, humanist identity.

ROUDINESCO: EUROPEAN LIBERTY VERSUS MUSLIM FANATICISM

Roudinesco also finds Islam threatening to French secular society, though the problems she associates with it vary slightly from those articulated by Kristeva. "I notice that psychoanalysis is for the moment forbidden...in the Arab-Muslim world, that is, in Islam,"³⁶⁸ she muses in her 2002 dialogue with Jacques Derrida,

In this world, and contrary to the Judeo-Christian world, the law of the father is still oppressive, and not 'oedipal,' 'deconstructed,' 'defeated.' Even if, as you [Derrida] say, we must not confuse Islam and Islamism, in Islam today, this tyranny is exercised on women's bodies, in particular in the form of the 'veil,' which, as I see it, symbolically forbids them to speak in their name.³⁶⁹

As in Kristeva's text, we find reference to two worlds: the "Arab-Muslim world," and the "Judeo-Christian world," once again established in opposition to each other. Particularly interesting about this excerpt of Roudinesco's is that she is responding to

³⁶⁷ Almond, *The New Orientalists*, 155.

³⁶⁸ Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 196.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

Derrida’s urging that we differentiate between different *types* of Islam—specifically, between Islamism, or fundamentalist Islam, and Islam generally. And yet Roudinesco diminishes this distinction, for “even if...we must not confuse [types of Islam],” to her mind, all of Islam exercises tyranny on women’s bodies and subjectivities, “symbolically forbid[ding] them to speak in their name.” By contrast, in the Judeo-Christian world, which can claim notions of the unconscious and psychoanalysis as its own, we have “the freedom to speak in one’s [own] name, and therefore to interrogate the essence of one’s own alienation”³⁷⁰—qualities that are “indispensable to the exercise of free association that characterizes Freudian treatment.”³⁷¹ Thus Roudinesco, like Kristeva, believes that psychoanalysis could be the answer to the French’s (secular) prayers: “One can imagine that psychoanalysis, if it manages to take root in the Muslim world, might serve to defeat, undo, or deconstruct this system, and particularly the repression of the feminine that it establishes.”³⁷² In line with Saïd’s notion of the intertextual discourse undergirding Orientalism, she notes that this is Benslama’s very hypothesis in *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, clearly displaying the influence and interrelatedness of the arguments being produced on this subject. Once again, psychoanalysis appears not just as a tool with which to *understand* Islam, but a tool with which to “defeat” or “undo” it.

Not only is psychoanalysis here used to undo Islam—it is simultaneously used to venerate France, as we see in Roudinesco’s exaltation of Revolution-era Republican ideals. Though on the surface such values—*liberté, fraternité, égalité*—

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid, footnote 61.

sound similar to those upheld in America, the conception of the way in which they must be enacted in society is starkly different. Roudinesco illuminates this in her dialogue with Derrida when the topic turns to smoking and political correctness, which Roudinesco feels is a censorship that has gone too far: "...every time I go [to the U.S.] I feel a terrible violence,"³⁷³ she claims:

Allow me to relate an anecdote. I saw our friend...leave a room full of professors, during a small party where we were gathered, simply because he wanted to smoke, and it had become impossible to smoke where we were. The exclusion of smokers seems downright horrific to me, this marking of 'difference'...in public places, with smokers on one side and nonsmokers on the other, amounts in my eyes to an unacceptable compartmentalization.³⁷⁴

The melodramatic use of "violence" and "horrific" in this anecdote highlights the difference in American and French attitudes toward the dangers of tobacco; it also, importantly for our purposes, serves to illustrate the difference between the American and French societal treatment of difference: it is the "marking of 'difference' in public places" that is so disturbing to Roudinesco about American smoking legislation. This is analogous to the issue that emerges in questions of the veil: the marking of religious difference in a public space—even of *gendered* difference—in that the latter is also "an unacceptable compartmentalization." In fact, when Derrida responds to Roudinesco by reminding her of the similar smoking legislation recently passed in their own country, Roudinesco replies, "yes, but fortunately it's not enforced here with the same rigidity, and I believe we owe it to the Revolution and to our republican ideals, which valorize the integration of the other as he is, not as we would wish for him to be."³⁷⁵ This comment takes on a certain irony when read in

³⁷³ Ibid, 29.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 30.

tandem with Roudinesco's remarks on Islam, which we recall from Chapter Two: republican ideals allow the French to valorize the integration of the other as he is—so long as he (or, more logically, *she*) is *not* a veil wearer, not a Muslim “silently connected by [her] veil to a fanatic god within, who impedes [her] freedom of judgment.”³⁷⁶

This exaltation of Enlightenment values and their supposed heir of Freudian subjectivity is a theme that transfers into Roudinesco's writings in the political arena, as we saw in the article we examined in Chapter Two. Recall that “the child—and later the adolescent—became a full-fledged subject, valorized in his desire and his sexuality since the Freudian discovery of the unconscious.”³⁷⁷ What is so threatening about the veil for Roudinesco, the scholar, analyst, and political writer, is that it tramples the right to emancipation, instead serving as a “symbol of rejection of otherness that goes against the principle of diversity and equality of the school of the republic.”³⁷⁸ Thus, Roudinesco's hypothetical, imagined veil wearers “risk remaining estranged from the principal content they are taught [in French school] and retaining only the utilitarian or technical aspects: something like a science without a conscience.”³⁷⁹ Here we see a theme of Orientalism highlighted by Saïd in his analysis of the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century French author Chateaubriand: that of Europeans teaching the Orient about liberty, a topic supposedly hitherto unknown and unpracticed there. Indeed,

a Western conquest of the Orient was not conquest after all, but [a generous extension of] liberty. Chateaubriand puts the whole idea in the Romantic

³⁷⁶ Roudinesco, *Le foulard*, my translation.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, my translation.

³⁷⁸ Ibid, my translation.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, my translation.

redemptive terms of a Christian mission to revive a dead world, to quicken in it a sense of its own potential, one which only a European can discern underneath a lifeless and degenerate surface.³⁸⁰

Here Saïd's description of Chateaubriand can apply to Roudinesco: two centuries later, she seems to be positing a similar argument about a no-longer Christian, but now *secular* mission to revive the Muslim students influenced by their fanatical God and instill them with humanism, with the subjectivity that only the West and its Freudian unconscious has discovered and enabled. As Toscano points out about psychoanalytically inspired treatments of Islam generally, "it is by contrast to something like a fanatical submission to the One, an excessive monotheism," as we see in Roudinesco's article about young Muslim students and their fanatical God, "that a form of 'Judeo-Christian' subjectivity might be regarded as normative within psychoanalysis."³⁸¹ Indeed, it is the *West's* discovery of the Freudian unconscious that Roudinesco sees as responsible for the humanism taught in contemporary French classrooms. Muslim students, always imagined as thinking constantly of their "fanatical god," do not have the Western subjectivity necessary for the French humanistic education to truly take hold. "More precisely," Toscano elaborates, "the 'Islamic subject' may be perceived as having missed or failed its secularization."³⁸² The Judeo-Christian and Freudian sense of subjectivity is that which is produced by and appropriate for the secular classroom—and for secularized society, generally. The psychoanalyzing of Islam continues to be bound up, not in the understanding of Islam, but in the *secularizing* of it.

³⁸⁰ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 172.

³⁸¹ Toscano, *Fanaticism as Fantasy*, 106.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

BENSLAMA: A PROJECT OF ASSIMILATION, A PROJECT OF OTHERING

Upon first glance, Fethi Benslama's attempt to psychoanalyze Islam appears more promising than Kristeva or Roudinesco's. Most notably, Benslama works to distinguish Islam generally from the fundamentalist strains that have contributed to the entire religion's recent notoriety, taking time to discuss terminology and the confusion and connotations that so often occur when Islam or Islamism is referenced. He is sensitive to the distinction "between the phenomenon of faith, along with its rites and dogmas, on the one hand, and the militant political movements that are inspired by that religion, on the other."³⁸³ In fact, Benslama identifies Islamic Fundamentalism as a non-religious phenomenon entirely. "We must think of Islam as both finite and infinite," he claims, "in order to distinguish the Islam of theology, whose system is historically complete, from an extension that is stripped of religious manifestations but that incorporates certain fundamental characteristics—ethical and poetic—in its opening up to the world." Just as fundamentalist Islamism is a new politicized discourse that retains and "incorporates certain...characteristics" of Islam, Benslama sees other religions breeding their own variants of fundamentalism: "Like other historical examples in Europe and elsewhere, Islamist discourse is the Islamic version of the modern crisis that has engendered an ideology containing all the characteristics of totalitarianism,"³⁸⁴ he claims. Implicit here is the idea that other religions and cultures have given rise to similar strains of fundamentalism, and that

³⁸³ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 42.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

such a phenomenon is the result of “the modern crisis,” as opposed to something intrinsic to Islam (i.e. a failed father complex, as Kristeva argues).

Benslama also adequately acknowledges the value of individuality in Islam, and works to explain why, though psychoanalysis has been less relevant for Islam, individual subjectivities are no less valued in Muslim culture. “[Islam] is indeed a culture of individuality, but one essentially governed by identification with God,”³⁸⁵ he explains. After examining Avicenna’s philosophical definition of the subject, he claims that “these considerations reveal just how highly developed the problem of individuality was in early Islamic thought and its complexity, free of the reductivism and trivialization we see today.”³⁸⁶ He criticizes those psychoanalysts who have claimed that ‘the Muslim’ is somehow inaccessible to psychoanalysis, that Muslim individuality does not exist in such a way that it can be analyzed, positing that “such remarks are characterized by ignorance and irresponsibility.”³⁸⁷ In fact, Benslama goes on to analyze Roudinesco’s work on where and how psychoanalysis comes to flourish and function across various cultural regions and countries, and through an examination of the three factors she identifies as “promot[ing] the establishment of psychoanalysis in a given country or cultural region,”³⁸⁸ he deftly explains why European psychoanalysts might claim that their methods are incompatible with Muslim patients. “The traditional subject...remains subject to a theological-political structure whose goal is to harmonize the human identification of individuality with

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 203.

³⁸⁶ Ibid, 202.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 203.

god and the political space,”³⁸⁹ he writes, referring to the traditional subject of Islam. But “the modern subject addressed by psychoanalysis appears in societies where the separation between the birth community and the political community has taken place through a civil revolution backed by a powerful government apparatus.”³⁹⁰ Here we see an acknowledgment of the political and material conditions in which psychoanalytic treatment takes place—finally, we have the reminder of political context so glaringly absent in Kristeva’s theory. Benslama goes on: “Moreover, psychoanalysis is a Western invention not because the West produced a more accomplished human individuality, one better suited to exist, experience pleasure, and die,” (this is a direct objection to Kristeva’s argument about the “genius of Christianity”), “but because the modern West has segmented the spaces of politics and the family in a new way and, let us not forget, has also fashioned a type of subject whose alienation necessitated the introduction of psychoanalysis.”³⁹¹ Finally, it would appear, we are dealing with the work of a sensitive psychoanalyst, who understands the specific Western historicity of his tool and method (psychoanalysis) and sees past the exaltation of Enlightenment values and Western subjectivity that appear so frequently in contemporary French theory and political arguments.

According to Benslama, then, the European tendency to reduce Islam’s complex and rich concept of individuality

arises either from an ideological prejudice in which modern liberal Western individualism appears as the summit of civilization’s accomplishments and hopes, a model for humanity’s future; or as a result of a cultural essentialism that, for some, idealizes Islamic integration of the individual in his environment but results in the opposite, and for others, produces the kind of

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 204.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

humiliation that turns Islam into a powerful system for the dissolution of the individual in the community.³⁹²

Notable here is Benslama's acknowledgement of an "ideological prejudice" that sounds quite similar to the one we uncovered in the works of Kristeva and Roudinesco, for whom "modern liberal Western individualism appears as the summit of civilization's accomplishments and hopes, a model for humanity's future." Again, we find a direct criticism of the tendency to mythologize modern Western subjectivity.

However, Benslama's next few lines veer in a different direction: for some, culturally essentializing Islam "produces the kind of humiliation that turns Islam into a powerful system for the dissolution of the individual in the community." Without the context of Benslama's other texts, the meaning of this line is not readily apparent—but a look at his political writing³⁹³ allows us to discern that Benslama is referring to the liberal tendency of those who fight in the name of anti-racism to propose that we protect Islam from "humiliation," from images that denigrate it.³⁹⁴ It is this sort of essentializing of Muslim individuality, that he feels, in fact, goes too far—to his mind, protection against the humiliation of Muslims,

*la censure au nom de l'islam tue, sacrifie, grille au feu de l'Enfer et dévore les insoumis, afin de les soumettre à la religion de la soumission ; (censorship in the name of Islam kills, sacrifices, grills on the fires of hell and devours dissenters in order to submit them to the religion of submission).*³⁹⁵

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ See Fethi Benslama, « *Le mouton qui blasphème* », *Le Manifeste des libertés*, accessed April 5, 2013, http://www.manifeste.org/article.php?id_article=302.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid, my translation.

It becomes clear that Benslama's sensitive treatment of Islam has its limits—for supporting Islam in France also means supporting censorship, and thus eradicating the French right to individuality, to freedom of speech. But more than that, Benslama sees “humiliation” as a fiction that allows Muslims to shirk responsibility: as he states in *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, “the theme of humiliation by the United States or the West allows them [Muslims] to escape their primary responsibility.”³⁹⁶

As Saïd reminds us, “like any set of durable ideas, Orientalist notions influenced the people who were called Orientals as well as those called Occidental,” and thus, “Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine.”³⁹⁷ Though Benslama is technically not “Occidental,” given his Tunisian roots and upbringing, we might ask if it is possible that he is nonetheless influenced by Orientalist notions—and that such notions constrain his thought. Let us not forget the impetus for Benslama's book: the need to “explain ourselves [Muslims, Orientals, etc.]” apart from the reigning concept of traditional Islam that the European so readily associates with every sort of Muslim. So he attempts to explain the contemporary problem of Islam, claiming that

Islam's ongoing importance during the past fifteen years reveals...the break with the subject of tradition and the release of destructive forces that flow directly from that break. The process is one of historical mutation, wherein the transition of man from the psyche of god to the psyche of the unconscious must be conceptualized.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 65.

³⁹⁷ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 41-42.

³⁹⁸ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, vii.

It is the undertaking of this conceptualization that Benslama takes to be “a responsibility I have recognized as my own for many years.”³⁹⁹ He takes on this responsibility—as the Oriental who must explain himself, explain his people, explain how he differs from those currently “releas[ing] destructive forces”—through psychoanalysis, through a Freudian investigation of Islam and Islamism’s relationship to their shared past.

Thus the pages of his book are full of detailed Quranic analyses, close readings of various Muslim “source texts” seen as central to the faith, all of which are executed admirably. Benslama’s claim is that these readings can elucidate something about the mind of the Muslim practitioner, as he witnessed personally in his patients that “for many people, Islam was still implicated in subjective and transindividual structures.”⁴⁰⁰ But one must question the premise of such a project: for is the claim that a particular Quranic passage determines a certain Muslim psyche really so much more advanced, really any more nuanced, than the nineteenth century attempts to characterize “the Arab mind”? We cannot forget that such attempts were not only produced by the European proponents of Orientalist discourse, but that “[Orientalism’s] influence...spread to ‘the Orient’ itself: the pages of books and journals in Arabic...[were] filled with second-order analyses by Arabs of ‘the Arab mind,’ ‘Islam,’ and other myths.”⁴⁰¹ Let us not forget, in other words, that “the modern Orient...participates in its own Orientalizing.”⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁴⁰¹ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 322.

⁴⁰² Ibid, 325.

So does Benslama, the Oriental, the secular psychoanalyst, really stray so far from the nineteenth century scholarly interest in the category of “Semitic,” from the idea of “a transtemporal, transindividual category, purporting to predict every discrete act of ‘Semitic’ behavior on the basis of some pre-existing ‘Semitic’ essence”⁴⁰³? As Saïd explains, when the supposed

truth about the distinctive differences between races, civilizations, and languages...went to the bottom of things, it asserted that there was no escape from origins and the types these origins enabled...it forced vision away from common, as well as plural, human realities like joy, suffering, political organization, forcing attention instead in the downward and backward direction of immutable origins.⁴⁰⁴

Is Benslama’s Freudian focus on origins, his contention that the originary scene of Islam bears some relevance for all Muslims in the world today, regardless of their lived realities and political situations, really so different than that of the Orientalists who came before him? For while he distinguishes between Islam and its fundamentalist extension, Benslama fails to examine the lived realities of contemporary Muslims, nor does he account for the Islams that exist in a vast variety of contexts. Instead, he focuses on “the appeal to origin,” which “reflects the hope of restoring the shield of religious illusion”⁴⁰⁵—a shield that has been damaged, Benslama tells us, in its encounter with contemporary science. It is from the breakdown of this shield that fundamentalist movements are bred, attempting to preserve religious truth in the face of shattered religion. Everything about his analysis—even of contemporary political movements—hinges on a close reading of Muslim textual origins.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 231.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 233.

⁴⁰⁵ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 23.

So despite his attention to the distinction between fundamentalism and Islam generally, telling slippages⁴⁰⁶ continue to pile up throughout Benslama's text, slippages that speak to the secular, Orientalist notions constraining his thought about Islam. One slippage is that his book is not just an examination of Islam, but an examination of certain *problems* associated with it.⁴⁰⁷ Yet another slippage resides in his treatment of religion more generally: Islam is seen as constituted by "primal fictions" and/or by "symbolic systems."⁴⁰⁸ The use of the descriptor "primal fictions" evokes a Freudian residue (think: religious "illusions"), but the term "symbolic systems" resonates with more contemporary anthropological conceptions of religion—many of which have been, in fact, criticized. Remember that what Asad takes issue with in the classic Geertzian definition of religion is the failure to think about symbols not just in and of themselves, but in an interrelated system, as symbols whose meaning is determined by certain power structures. Geertz's theory of religion, like Benslama's of Islam, has a cognitive focus; for Geertz religion fills a psychological need, it is a system of *belief* that enables one to study, as Benslama does, its effect on the psyche.

But as Asad points out, this notion that religion and belief are analogous—that religion is not comprised of *practice*, or a way of life in a certain context, but something one must *believe* before all else—is a notion with a particular history. Namely, the primacy of belief is a Protestant, post-Enlightenment value that, through the hegemonic structures of scholarship on religion in the Western world, has been

⁴⁰⁶ Here I borrow Joseph Massad's term; see Joseph A. Massad, "Psychoanalysis, Islam, & The Other of Liberalism", *Umbria: A Journal of the Unconscious* 2009.

⁴⁰⁷ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, viii.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*, vii.

successfully filtered into and reified as academic “truths” about what it is to be *religious* or to be a *religion* generally.⁴⁰⁹ “Indeed, belief (rather than ritual, for example) seems to have been the pivot around which Christians have told their own history,” religious studies scholar Donald Lopez points out, “Christians have also described what came to be known as ‘world religions’ from the perspective of belief,” and, as we see evidenced in Benslama’s text, “through complicated patterns of influence, the representatives of non-Christian religions have come to speak of themselves in terms of belief.”⁴¹⁰ This belief-based conception is also fundamental to Orientalism; “the old Orientalist truism that Islam is about texts, not about people”⁴¹¹ is born of the same Protestant conception that religion is text-based belief as opposed to embodied enacted practice.

Thus we begin to see the double movement at work in Benslama’s text: there is the attempt to *assimilate* Islam, to view it through a Protestant-inherited secular lens, to assure his European audience of Islam’s strong value of individuality (a value that Europeans just so happen to share); but there is also a movement of *othering*, of further distancing himself from the Islamic fundamentalism he so negatively portrays. While most of Benslama’s argument hinges on his desire to “consider the question of

⁴⁰⁹ There is extensive scholarship on the “truths” that come to define “religion,” as influenced by the Western, specifically Protestant, primacy of belief. Such “truths” that come to constitute “religion” include reliance on textual authority, an emphasis on cognition above affect, and the expectation that individuals can articulate and justify the reasoning behind certain pious practices, (to name a few). See Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), Webb Keane (2007), Jonathan Z. Smith (1998), and Donald S. Lopez (1998) for historical accounts of how this process occurs both theoretically and on the ground.

⁴¹⁰ Donald S. Lopez Jr., “Belief”, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21.

⁴¹¹ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 305.

the father in Islam in relation to other monotheisms,”⁴¹² a clear assimilationist attempt, as Massad points out, “it is in the context of discussing contemporary Islamisms...that Benslama’s book shows less engagement with psychoanalytic thought and concepts and moves to liberal critiques concerned with the individual, freedom of thought, tolerance, and the separation of the theological and the political from each other.”⁴¹³ Indeed, according to Benslama, “[practitioners of fundamentalist Islam] have regressed to the period of barbarism...that is, to a pre-Islamic period.”⁴¹⁴ Meanwhile, as Benslama distances himself and his Islam from this Islamism, he works to fit Islam generally within a European, particularly French, worldview. For “Benslama’s ‘Freudian deconstruction,’ whether it uncovers an ‘Islam’ that is individualist or anti-individualist, can only do so in relation to a modern liberal European value that Benslama posits as universal, namely, ‘individualism.’”⁴¹⁵ And indeed, how universal really is “our universal psychoanalytic knowledge concerning the relationship between psyche and civilization”⁴¹⁶? Even putting aside the obviously Western nature of “psychoanalytic knowledge,” many Americans and Europeans outside of France have trouble swallowing Freud’s theses on the supposed connection between psyche and civilization. Thus Massad concludes that “Benslama is engaged in a project of simultaneously othering the Islam of the Islamists and identifying his own wished-for Islam with Europeanness.”⁴¹⁷

⁴¹² Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 70.

⁴¹³ Joseph A. Massad, “Psychoanalysis, Islam, & The Other of Liberalism”, *Umbria: A Journal of the Unconscious* 2009, 47. Henceforth “Massad, *Psychoanalysis, Islam & The Other*.”

⁴¹⁴ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 26.

⁴¹⁵ Massad, *Psychoanalysis, Islam & The Other*, 52.

⁴¹⁶ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis, Islam & The Other*, viii.

⁴¹⁷ Massad, *Psychoanalysis, Islam & The Other*, 52.

And though Benslama wishes to illustrate an Islam that has the possibility of assimilating, according to his text, it would seem that in its current form, Islam has not yet come to terms with modernity successfully, as Europe has. In fact, Benslama takes issue with Islam's use of science, differentiating it from the European usage:

The invention of the modern subject in Europe issues from a long period of historical gestation marked by numerous mutations and crises that took place over several centuries. Since the Renaissance, in every area of civilization, the work of transformation has required the repeated efforts of a large number of interpreters, until the Freudian disclosure of the unconscious mind. Nothing of the sort happened in Islam. Its entrance into the historical world has been sudden and stressful because of the anticolonial struggle, leaving little room for the work of interpretation. The acceptance of science and technology did not occur through a process of creative integration but took place passively and was accompanied by amazement, and discoveries were grasped as if they had fallen from the sky.⁴¹⁸

Thus, as the argument goes, the Islamic attempt to appeal to science or integrate science into religious argumentation is fundamentally flawed (“destined to fail from the start”⁴¹⁹), because “in the absence of any critical function, without any accompanying ethics or aesthetics, we could say that this modernization took place without the necessary work of culture.”⁴²⁰ Here, the hypocrisy in Benslama's argument comes to the surface: though elsewhere he is critical of the exaltation of the Enlightenment, of holding Western subjectivity as somehow superior, here the psychoanalyst claims directly that the West had a “critical function,” an “ethics,” and “aesthetics”—in short a “culture”—that Islam did not, and does not. Here the ‘modernity’ he associates with the West is taken to be a historical fact, rather than a

⁴¹⁸ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 45.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

particular interpretation of history.⁴²¹ The assumption that the West is the pinnacle of all that is modern, the standard against which to judge Islam and other cultures, permeates Benslama's text.

But it is worth exploring exactly what Benslama means by "the work of culture" that he attributes to the West. He explains his theory of a "mutation of civilization," which he defines as "[occurring] whenever change affects the constituents of the pentahedron (time, *jouissance*, alterity, death and truth) and brings about a new status quo in the connections among men and in their relation to the world."⁴²² When such a mutation occurs, "cultural work is necessary so that the new status quo can be assimilated by the psychic life of the individual and can ensure its unconscious anchorage in the human collectivity,"⁴²³ the analyst claims. Europe underwent such a mutation, "leading to the emergence of the modern subject"⁴²⁴—but, unlike Islam, it was guided by "works of art in all areas of culture, works that provided a way of conceptualizing change, or at least of making it available to individual and collective representation."⁴²⁵ Meanwhile, Islam's entrance into the modern world was shaped by different, less kind social and political conditions, marked by colonial violence and "the scarcity of works [of culture, of art, one would

⁴²¹ Massad's text points toward Benslama's failure to destabilize the notion of modernity in the first place; see Massad, *Psychoanalysis, Islam & The Other*, 57. Anthropologist Lara Deeb and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, among many others, write about the "historicist assumption in many Western academic and media discourses that views the West as the universal example for all that is modern" (Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 14). See also Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000).

⁴²² Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 51-52.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

imagine] that illuminate the present and outline the future.”⁴²⁶ It is this too-abrupt, incomplete transformation, this inability to adapt to the mutation of civilization, that Benslama cites as responsible for the current sect of Islamic fundamentalism threatening the world today. For “we can consider the Islamists’ cry of revolt as a mass protest brought about by the painful effects of transformation of their world and the failure to implement *Kulturarbeit* [cultural work], a transformation thus made unthinkable, absurd, and traumatic.”⁴²⁷ Islam did not undergo its own Enlightenment, leading to waves of despair and destruction and rendering any current attempt to integrate scientific knowledge completely hopeless. The logic here is sadly familiar, sadly reminiscent of the sort Saïd pointed out in *Orientalism*: “We had our Newtonian revolution; they didn’t. As thinkers we are better off than they are.”⁴²⁸

Consequently, a binary comes to structure Benslama’s text: Islam versus science, rationalism, and even psychoanalysis, with which the unmodern religion is seen as incompatible. Indeed, if Islam undergoes “a fatal encounter with the apparatus of scientific truth...the mental coherence of religiosity can no longer be preserved.”⁴²⁹ And it is clear what side of the purported dichotomy Benslama has aligned with: like his great Austrian predecessor, the psychoanalyst is self-avowedly scientific as opposed to religious; “the Islam I plan to investigate here will never again be the Islam of my heritage,” he assures us, “but an Islam interpreted through the problematic of the unconscious.”⁴³⁰ As Massad reminds us, this supposed opposition between science and Islam is not a new one, but “continues a tradition inaugurated by

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 47.

⁴²⁹ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 48.

⁴³⁰ Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge*, 9.

Orientalist Ernest Renan's infamous debate with Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in the nineteenth century about this very question wherein Islam and the Arabs were castigated as 'hostile to science'⁴³¹—and like Benslama, we all know which side of the debate the Orientalists chose.

Just as Saïd refers to nineteenth century Orientalist Edward Lane's "dramatic double presence (as fake Muslim and genuine Westerner),"⁴³² Benslama is able to control his material through his own narrative double presence—this time, as *real* Tunisian Muslim and aspiring Westerner. Benslama is able to speak with narrative authority thanks to his own heritage—and yet it is very clearly a heritage from which he distances himself in the name of scientific, specifically Freudian, and therefore *Western*, objectivity. Like the Orientalists who came before him, Benslama speaks not *to* the Muslim population he writes about, but *for* them; he is the representative who feels it his personal responsibility to give voice to the Orient, an Orient that, without Western "critical functions," cannot give voice to itself. As in all the texts we have examined, Saïd's signs of Orientalist discourse ring true: "the representation [of the Orient] is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient."⁴³³ Thus, in the end, even Benslama's otherwise valuable book falls prey to the secular—and Orientalist (for as Anidjar reminds us, the two are often one and the same)—temptation to tell Muslims that in

⁴³¹ Massad, *Psychoanalysis, Islam & The Other*, 55.

⁴³² See Saïd's discussion of Edward William Lane's *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) in Saïd, *Orientalism*, 161.

⁴³³ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 21.

order to engage in scientific discourse, in order to end their fanaticism, they must go through their own reformation.⁴³⁴ Until then, well, *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient.

THIRTY YEARS AFTER *ORIENTALISM*: OH, HOW FAR WE HAVE COME

We find ourselves here, in 2013, examining texts all published approximately within the past decade: Benslama's 2002 book, Roudinesco's 2003 article, Kristeva's 2008 collection of essays and interviews. And yet, as we have seen, though the mechanisms may have changed, many of the themes of Orientalism that Saïd identified as at work throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and into 1978 have perpetuated. Even these three eminent liberal scholars fit Saïd's description of the Orientalist pitfall, "conceiv[ing] of humanity either in large collective terms or in abstract generalities."⁴³⁵ The very Freudian notion that an entire civilization or religious group can be analyzed on the basis of some sort of shared psyche contributes to the Orientalist error that these French thinkers are complicit in replicating. While Kristeva and Benslama analyze all Muslims on large collective terms based on an analysis of Quranic passages (or in Kristeva's case, unsubstantiated references to Quranic narratives), Roudinesco deals in abstract generalities, referring to a hypothetical veil wearer adherent to her "fanatical God." But "the Orientalist not only speaks in vast generalities; he also seeks to convert each aspect of Oriental or Occidental life into an unmediated sign of one or the other geographical half."⁴³⁶ We see this in Roudinesco, Kristeva, and Benslama, as the Enlightenment versus

⁴³⁴ Alberto Toscano's own commentary on Benslama has influenced my thinking here. See Toscano, *Fanaticism as Fantasy*, 114.

⁴³⁵ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 154.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid*, 246-247.

uncultured binary takes hold: values of individualism and proper art to sublimate suffering are the provinces of France, of the Occident; while destructive waves of fanaticism and an inability to move beyond adolescence and into modernity come to constitute Islam.

And yet the three scholars whose works we examined hail from an era *critical* of modernity and, it follows, critical of the very nineteenth century moves Saïd identifies: Benslama trained in psychoanalysis in Paris in the eighties; he, like Roudinesco and Kristeva, came of intellectual age in the era of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, of poststructuralism, while Roudinesco took courses taught by Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. None of these thinkers conceives of subjectivity as anything less than a fluid entity, as anything less than a constant process. But as we have seen, resonances of modernity linger. Indeed, Saïd observed that with the arrival of postmodernity

there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient.'⁴³⁷

Certainly we see this in pejorative phrases like "Allah's madmen," but while the cultural stereotyping seems to have intensified, the stereotypes themselves appear to contain some variability. Sometimes Muslims are idealistic adolescents, other times they are despairing, destructive fundamentalists, and yet other times they are conflicted, veil-wearing students in French schools, unable to retain their humanist education save for in a rote, utilitarian way. As we see, especially within Benslama's

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 26.

text, “Islam appears to have multiple identities,” thus allowing “the ‘otherness’ control of Islam, like the volume control of any stereo or radio, ...[to] be turned up or down according to the required context.”⁴³⁸ But in spite of the varying images conjured up in the name of “Islam,” the tightly knit structure of discourse Saïd described appears to remain intact. Indeed, as in 1978, “what we have [today in France] is a series of writers who draw their knowledge of Islam and the condition of their relationship to Islam from another writer quite simply out of an artistic/intellectual sympathy for the figure concerned, quite irrespective of whether the information gathered is accurate or not.”⁴³⁹ Freud may not have had any knowledge of Islam, as he himself admits in a paragraph in *Moses and Monotheism*—and yet he remains the referent, the source material on Islam, for this culturally influential group of French scholars today.

The result is that when we read about Islam in France today, we continue to read works tailored to a Western audience; “the Islam of the[se] writers and...thinkers...remains invariably an Islam-for-others, an *Islam-pour-l’Occident*, an *Islam-pour-l’Europe*, and never an *Islam-en-soi*, an Islam-for-itself.”⁴⁴⁰ As Almond so aptly points out, the old cliché remains as true in postmodernity as it did throughout modernity: “That in attempting to write about the Other, we invariably end up writing about ourselves.”⁴⁴¹ The portrayals we have examined of Islam are ultimately far more telling about France today than they are about Islam, telling of the cultural production and maintenance of a particular mentality that imagines Islam as

⁴³⁸ Almond, *The New Orientalists*, 195.

⁴³⁹ Ibid, 201.

⁴⁴⁰ Here Almond borrows Sartre’s term. Ibid, 203.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

the unenlightened, the antithesis to a Christian-inherited culture of art, literature, and critical self-reflection. But each of these thinkers draws on Lacan—thus one would expect that their views of subjectivity must be more nuanced than such black-and-white, reductionist categories; certainly they must recognize humanity to be more context-dependent than the sweeping phrases they churn out about Muslims *generally*, about Islam *generally*. Yet “what remains surprising is that so many of the figures responsible for delineating and demonstrating [modernity’s] situation of epistemological finitude so visibly fail to escape it in their own work.”⁴⁴² The poststructuralist critique does not, for these scholars, extend far enough to eschew the Orientalist tropes that continue to constrain Western thought. As postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, in writing on Indian nationalism,

the certitudes that constitute the colonial theater have not vanished with the demise of formal imperialism. The compulsion...to think and translate the world through the categories of the European imperial-modern is real and deeply rooted in institutional practices, both within and outside the university.⁴⁴³

Thus French scholarship continues to use Freud and his theory on other monotheisms as an uninterrogated lens of authority through which to view Islam, allowing

something patently foreign and distant [to] acquire, for one reason or another, a status more rather than less familiar...a new median category emerges...that allows one to see new things...as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Difference—Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal”, *Tensions of Empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world*, ed. Frederick Cooper, Ann L. Stoler, (Berkeley and Los Angeles California: University of California Press, 1997), 400.

⁴⁴⁴ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 58-59.

The Islam that threatens the Frenchman's identity, the *hijab*-wearing woman whose foreign silhouette has permeated French borders and, in so doing, destabilized French values, all seem controllable if assimilated within the Western, secular lens, controlled through our familiar psychoanalytic knowledge, and compared to the forms of monotheism we already know. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "The West...[was] the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West...[was] the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Orientalist behavior."⁴⁴⁵ But now the West—specifically, the adopted Frenchman or woman—is the psychoanalyst, the wise one sitting back in his chair as the hysterical Muslim lies prone on the scientist's couch, an object awaiting diagnosis.

So Toscano's question remains: "What is it to treat a culture, to diagnose a religion?"⁴⁴⁶ Saïd's question from 1978 remains relevant as well:

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say of men into 'us' (Westerners) and 'they' (Orientals). For such divisions are generalities whose use historically and actually has been to press the importance of the distinction between some men and some other men, usually towards not especially admirable ends. When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and end points of analysis, research, public policy...the result is usually to polarize the distinction—the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western—and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies.⁴⁴⁷

None of the accounts of Islam we have explored here encourage further interaction between East and West, between the secular French *citoyen* and first or second-generation Muslim immigrant. Instead, they formulate Islam in such a way that it

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, 109.

⁴⁴⁶ Toscano, *Fanaticism as Fantasy*, 105.

⁴⁴⁷ Saïd, *Orientalism*, 44-45.

must change, must grow up, if France is to deal with the present crisis Islam poses. But what is disturbing is that this mode of representation of the Orient remains academically legitimate; “for whereas it is no longer possible to write learned (or even popular) disquisitions on either ‘the Negro mind’ or ‘the Jewish personality,’ it is perfectly possible to engage in such research as ‘the Islamic mind,’ or ‘the Arab character.’”⁴⁴⁸ The consequences of the acceptability of such scholarship, even in the twenty-first century, even decades into postmodernism, is that even today, to look at liberal French scholarship that psychoanalyzes Islam “for a lively sense of an Oriental’s human or even social reality—as a contemporary inhabitant of the modern world—is to look in vain.”⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, 262.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid, 176.

CONCLUSION

“As I see it, psychoanalysis has not yet undertaken and thus still less succeeded in thinking, penetrating, and changing the axioms of the ethical, the juridical, and the political, notably in those seismic places where the theological phantasm of sovereignty quakes and where the most traumatic, let us say in a still confused manner the most cruel events of our day are being produced.”

—Jacques Derrida⁴⁵⁰

Jonathan Z. Smith claims that “[t]he most common form of classifying religions, found both in native categories and in scholarly literature, is dualistic and can be reduced...to ‘theirs’ and ours.”⁴⁵¹ Unfortunately, efforts to psychoanalyze Islam in France, despite the various motivations that inspire them, have thus far failed to move beyond this ‘theirs’ and ‘ours’ dichotomy. Though the exact rhetorical means by which such reduction occurs is specific to each analyst’s argument, the texts that endeavor to psychoanalyze Islam share a common feature: a failure to interrogate the secular-as-modern-and-rational (and in some cases, gender tolerant) narrative that is transmitted through the invocation of Freudian theory and that finds resonance in pervasive French discourse on *laïcité*.

Fascinating in and of itself, however, is the form that such reductionist and, as we have seen, Orientalist, arguments take. Attempts to psychoanalyze theological episodes and their effects on religious practitioners would not be acceptable as a credible methodology in many parts of the world, and yet the scholars who have

⁴⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, “Psychoanalysis Searches the States of its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of a Sovereign Cruelty”, Trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 244.

⁴⁵¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 276.

undertaken this endeavor draw on, and are themselves produced by, a powerful French psychoanalytic culture that enables and values such scholarship. Despite attempts by scholars like Benslama to distinguish between various sects of Islam, ultimately psychoanalysis has become a vehicle in France for a liberalism that seeks to diagnose and cure a people who are viewed as lagging behind the positive force of secular modernity. This strain of liberalism is quick to diagnose the violence of the Muslim other as the result of an unrepressed death drive; but liberalism itself is not immune to violence, nor is it afraid to enact it symbolically against Islam.

This does not mean that psychoanalysis is necessarily doomed to produce reductionist readings of Islam. Certainly, there is a psychological dimension to any religion, and a psychological dimension to both the wearing and banning of the headscarf. It is not my contention that simply discounting a psychological perspective is the magic solution that will rid us of biases—prejudice can make its way into scholarship with or without the involvement of Freud or Lacan. But while invocations of psychoanalytic theory do not *necessitate* faulty analyses, the question still remains: can psychoanalysis truly enable an understanding of Islam in contemporary France?

The editors of *Umbria: The Journal of the Unconscious* believe that psychoanalysis can help to understand Islam generally; in fact, the premise of their special issue on Islam “is that psychoanalysis offers a unique, powerful, and even necessary approach.”⁴⁵² Joan Copjec, who introduces the issue, anticipates the objection that “the discourse of psychoanalysis is entirely inappropriate to this task, that its categories for analyzing are just another example of the West’s ambition to

⁴⁵² Joan Copjec, “Introduction: Islam & The Exotic Science,” *Umbria: A Journal of the Unconscious* 2009, 8.

Occidentalize the world, to market its franchise world-wise.”⁴⁵³ She rejects such claims, reminding us that they suppose “that the task psychoanalysis sets itself is *indeed* one of objectification—of the Arab or any other mind; which it is not.”⁴⁵⁴ If employed correctly, a psychoanalytic reading should not objectify, but rather should understand its subjects; it should do “less to qualify than to de-qualify or de-regionalize.”⁴⁵⁵ According to Copjec’s argument, psychoanalysis does precisely the opposite of objectify, as it is “devoted to studying the exotic force that operates in the subject to push her from herself, opening a margin of separation between her and parts of herself she will never be able to assimilate.”⁴⁵⁶

I agree with Copjec that psychoanalysis potentially enables us to do more than make blanket-statements about one type of “mind” or subjectivity, instead gesturing toward the very nuances inherent in any subjectivity. But I find Copjec’s final argument on behalf of psychoanalysis much less convincing: “Because psychoanalysis developed as a critique of many liberal Western notions, the accusation that it seeks to export these very notions hardly makes sense,”⁴⁵⁷ she claims. And yet we have seen, through Almond and our readings of texts by Benslama, Roudinesco, and Kristeva, how critiques of modernity can still be indebted to the very modernity they critique. Psychoanalysis does not cleanse itself completely of the “liberal Western notions” it critiques, and as Almond points out, it is often in the treatment of Islam that “the unexpected and repressed indebtedness of the critique

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

of modernity to modernity itself”⁴⁵⁸ rises to the surface. As we saw, each thinker whose text we examined fails to interrogate the Enlightenment narrative of modernity, the narrative of the Western nation-state as a land of supposed freedom and gender equality; the rational secularism and science so esteemed by Freud remain unquestioned authorities with which to measure and differentiate an Islam supposedly in need of its own cultural reformation.

And yet psychoanalysis cannot be entirely discounted as a useful tool simply because it fails to break entirely from the Western notions it critiques. Perhaps, however, the use of this tool should be conceived differently. As Derrida explains,

it is not the Freudian theses that count the most in my view, but rather the way in which Freud has helped us to call into question a large number of things concerning law, right, religion, patriarchal authority, etc. Thanks to the impulse of the initial Freudian send-off, one can, for example, renew the question of responsibility: in place of a subject conscious of himself, answering for himself in a sovereign manner before the law, one can introduce the idea of divided, differentiated ‘subject’ who cannot be reduced to a conscious, egological intentionality. And the idea of a ‘subject’ installing, progressively, laboriously, always imperfectly, the stabilized—that is, non-natural, essentially and always unstable—conditions of his or her autonomy: against the inexhaustible and invincible background of a heteronomy. Freud helps us to place in question the tranquil assurances of responsibility.⁴⁵⁹

I agree with Derrida here: Freudian theory remains useful in the modern age in the larger questions it poses of responsibility—and, as Saïd reminds us, of identity.⁴⁶⁰ Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* in particular has the capacity to appeal to besieged identities other than the Judaism it discusses; it in fact dismantles the presupposed homogeneity of a religious and ethnic group. While Freud himself hails from a time when the Orientalist academy was booming, and produced theory that was certainly

⁴⁵⁸ Almond, *The New Orientalists*, 196.

⁴⁵⁹ Derrida, *For What Tomorrow*, 176.

⁴⁶⁰ See Edward W. Saïd, *Freud and the Non-European*.

less than sympathetic toward religion, his theory does not necessitate a reductionist reading of a *particular* ethnic or religious group. In fact, both Lacanian and Freudian understandings of subjectivity can help us to produce more nuanced scholarship on identity—scholarship that understands identity as fluid and dynamic, as constantly in process,⁴⁶¹ as opposed to eternally determined by religious founding texts.

But the danger that psychoanalysis can become a specifically “secular clinic”⁴⁶² is always present in the attempt to treat Islam, and problems with these psychoanalytic understandings arise when Christian-inherited secularism is taken as an uninterrogated lens for analysis. As Toscano points out,

taking...a Christian secularism as both historically and psychically normative hampers psychoanalysis...it ethnicizes and culturalizes the unconscious by presuming that one can gain insight into the psychic disturbances and political difficulties of individual ‘Muslims’ by postulating fantasies that take place at the level of the religious text itself.⁴⁶³

Indeed, as we see in Kristeva and Benslama, inquiries into the variety of Muslim practices in the present context are absent, instead replaced insufficiently by the vain hope that the Quran and Hadith themselves can shed light on the psyches of all individual Muslims, psyches which are assumed to be produced somehow apart from the discourses of other prevailing contemporary phenomena and cultural texts. The other problem with psychoanalysis becoming the “midwife of secularism”⁴⁶⁴ is that secularism “serves mostly—and certainly has *historically* served—one particular religion...and one economic game, and one elite-serving apparatus, namely, the

⁴⁶¹ The work of Judith Butler is a prime example of a Freudian and Lacanian understanding of subjectivity as “in process;” she does not undertake a psychoanalysis of Islam but her use of psychoanalytic theory to produce nuanced thought on identity is the sort I have in mind when I discuss the capability of psychoanalysis to allow us to think more deeply.

⁴⁶² Here I use Toscano’s term. See Toscano, *Fanaticism as Fantasy*, 105 and 112.

⁴⁶³ Toscano, *Fanaticism as Fantasy*, 114.

⁴⁶⁴ Here I use Toscano’s term.

secular nation-state, the discourse of power that legitimates itself and presents itself as secular as if *indifferent* to religion yet producing religion as a...problem.”⁴⁶⁵ To psychoanalyze in the name of, and from a perspective of secularism, is to contribute to a particular secular and Orientalist project, to participate in the process of self-differentiation and identity production *against* and through Islam.

I contend that if the French can interrogate this embedded Orientalist and secularist mentality, if psychoanalysis can confront these vestiges of modernity so often carried within it, then there is hope that psychoanalysis can be used productively to think about Islam in France. And yet its use is precarious—for as Derrida warns,

psychoanalysis may serve as a conduit for...new forms of violence...ones more difficult to detect...alternatively, it may constitute an irreplaceable means for deciphering them, and hence a prerequisite of their denunciation in specific terms—a necessary precondition, then, of a struggle and a transformation. Inasmuch, indeed, as psychoanalysis does not analyze, does not denounce, does not struggle, does not transform (and does not transform itself *for these purposes*), surely it is in danger of becoming nothing more than a perverse and sophisticated appropriation of violence, or at best merely a new weapon in the symbolic arsenal.⁴⁶⁶

The fact remains that these “new forms of violence,” “difficult to detect” though they may be, are prevalent—a 2002 survey indicates that 70 percent of the French population declared themselves to be racist, “even while claiming to be hostile to all forms of discrimination.”⁴⁶⁷ It remains more crucial than ever, in order to end this racism, in order to enable understanding rather than perpetuate misunderstanding, that psychoanalysis transform itself by interrogating the vestiges of its Orientalist past.

⁴⁶⁵ Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, 51.

⁴⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Geopsychanalysis: ‘...and the rest of the world,’” *American Imago*, 48:2 (Summer 1991), 211, as quoted by Massad, *Psychoanalysis, Islam & The Other*, 56.

⁴⁶⁷ Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 115.

For unfortunately, in their current conceptions, psychoanalytic readings of Islam have yet to offer us meaningful insight about practicing Muslims—rather, they have offered us insight into the persistence of a French mythologizing of the project of secular modernity, a project that relies upon the construction of a pathological, irrational other. Freud has aided the French, not in an understanding of Islam, but in an indictment of it. One is reminded of Jacqueline Rose’s thoughts on *Moses and Monotheism* and *Totem and Taboo*: “You can reject [their]...flawed historical argument[s]...while accepting the underlying thesis that there is no sociality without violence, that people are most powerfully and effectively united by what they agree to hate.”⁴⁶⁸ In the case of the French psychoanalytic discourse on Islam, Freud’s theory rings more true than ever.

⁴⁶⁸ Jacqueline Rose response to Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, (London: Freud Museum, 2003), 75.

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