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"My Way": Charles Taylor on identity and recognition in a secular democracy

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Abstract

How should we evaluate Charles Taylor's famous essay "The politics of recognition" (1992) and other related texts in a time where, at least in Europe, the ideal of a "multicultural society" has lost appeal? This article first tries to set out the way in which Taylor links the modern concepts of recognition, identity and authenticity, and how he argues why modernity not only demands a politics of equal dignity but also a politics of difference. We also discuss his more recent proposal, rethinking the whole idea of secularism and a "secular democracy" – again: to prepare a just and workable answer to societies marked by (not only religious) diversity. We conclude our contribution with three critical remarks on Taylor's approach: about the recent politicization of culture in Europe and elsewhere, about the necessity of a new role of the public domain, and about the core concept of authenticity.

Key words

Recognition; authenticity; secular democracy; identity; public domain

1. Introduction

In the political arena of my part of the world "multiculturalism" as political position or programme nowadays seems hardly tenable.[1] In

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public discourse in countries like France[2] and the Netherlands the term is mostly used polemically, to describe and discredit a rival in one stroke. Without much appreciation for the diverse meanings of the term, "multiculturalists" are sometimes considered the naïve supporters of political correctness, by others as cultural relativists, or – in France – as representatives of a *Communautarisme*, that refuge of undemocratic or even totalitarian forces. Unsurprisingly, the image a Trojan horse being hauled in in the name of multicultural policy has constantly cropped up over the past few years.

Such *framing* is of course superficial, and does not go much further than rather ephemeral tweets, posts and soundbites. But right from the start, the whole idea of a multicultural society has also been the subject of sophisticated criticism.[3] Ever since the publication of his essay *The politics of recognition* (1992) – possibly his most widely read and certainly most widely translated essay – Charles Taylor has been regarded as a philosophical defender of multiculturalism. But is that a just assessment? And are the objections to

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of democracy, historically, dating back to classical antiquity even, has been a concept of limited participation and control by the few" (Brown, p.3), and that it is quite probable that the contemporary democratic model (Brown focuses on the democracy in the USA, I was talking about European democracies) and Taylor's idea of authenticity can only be relevant in (South-) Africa with substantial amendments. But I also think that Taylor's communitarian liberalism is more hospitable to ideals like Ubuntu (Brown, p. 6) than procedural variants of liberalism. I would be very curious to learn about a new, post-colonial idea of authenticity and its link to democracy when Larmore's alternative to Taylor's concept of authenticity (valued by Cilliers in her comment) is criticized as "a bit fanciful and idealistic" (I would think this isn't a disadvantage of it) by Brown. As Taylor already recommended, we must "keep on disputing the definition and meaning of authenticity".

2   See for instance Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la Reconnaissance* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2004); English translation id, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007), in which he refers to the "highly polemical character of a notion such as multiculturalism" (p. 213).

3   For example, five well-founded critiques from five different viewpoints might include: Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), Ch. 4 (from within French enlightenment thinking); Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality. An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) (from egalitarian liberalism); Roger Scruton, "In Defence of the Nation", in *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990, pp. 299–329 (from conservative nationalism); Stanley Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism", in *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 56–72 (from postmodern thinking) and Zygmunt Baumann, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) (from critical sociological thinking).

a multi-cultural society, which have become much more clearly delineated in the 25 years since Taylor's essay was published, also applicable to his version of his version of multiculturalism?

In *The politics of recognition* Taylor's immediate concern is to provide a philosophical vocabulary to enable discussion of questions high on the agenda of global politics, ones not infrequently the cause of great division: how should a liberal, secular democracy have to deal with deep" cultural plurality or "diversity"? Which rights and obligations should newly arrived people (e.g., immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees) have in their countries of arrival, and what are the majority populations in these countries entitled to expect and demand? Where lie the boundaries of tolerance within "multi-coloured" nation states? With this, Taylor is also interested in a genealogical and hermeneutic question: how is it that under our modern conditions, we so frequently and vehemently speak of identity and recognition, and which cultural and moral sensibilities does this betray?

While in 1992 Taylor mostly gave examples from the struggles for the (literary) canon at universities and the demand for cultural survival of minority cultures and languages (he was personally involved the Quebecan struggle), his later texts are concerned with the question of how a secular democracy should deal with the diversity of life views and their expressions within the public sphere. In this instance again Taylor sees his task as primarily that of presenting a conceptual framework, and of formulating a few political-ethical principles against a description of their historical background in order to enable discussion of concrete matters. Sometimes he does, however, go a bit further by also making concrete policy suggestions – revealing the politician Taylor had indeed been for a long time.

In this article I will first set out the systematic core of Taylor's "politics of recognition", that is, the way he links the concepts *recognition*, *identity* and *authenticity*; those concepts by which the modern moral order distinguishes itself from traditional, hierarchical societies. It is this connection which makes it possible to understand that modernity not only demands a "politics of equal dignity", but also a "politics of difference". The question of how far a liberal society should go in this regard is explored in section one. I argue in section two, that recent debates on religions and other life-views, and their public status, led Taylor to propose revision and reconsideration

of "secularism" and the principles of secular democracy. In section three I conclude by providing a few side notes to his proposals.

2.   Recognition, identity and authenticity

The struggle for recognition

In *The politics of recognition* Taylor sees the need for recognition especially reflected in the fact that the political agenda now includes the continued *lack of* recognition, appreciation and estimation suffered by historically marginalised groups. He is concerned with the consequences this has for the self-image and life options of, for instance, women, people of colour, colonialized peoples and minorities. Later in his text he also refers to Franz Fanon's famous *Les damnés de la Terre*[4], which strongly articulated the position that "the major weapon of the colonizers was the imposition of their image of the colonized on the subjugated people"[5]. Fanon makes clear that recognition is not a matter of correct form or politeness, but something far more fundamental, namely "a vital human need", one worth dying for. In certain instances he even considers violent struggle a necessity.[6]

Taylor starts off by looking at the historical conditions underlying the current struggle for recognition and our sensitivities in this regard. In the first instance, it is in the rise of an egalitarian democratic society and a departure from the old hierarchical one where recognition was tied to (bringing) tribute, and thus to inequality. We have largely replaced the concept of bringing tribute to an elect few with the concept of *equal dignity* which everyone is entitled to as human being and citizen.

The second condition which enabled recognition to gain such crucial significance according to Taylor is the rise of the modern ideal of *authenticity* towards the end of the eighteenth century. This ideal was most strongly

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4   Franz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1961), English tradition *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1975).

5   Charles Taylor, "The politics of Recognition", in Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*, with commentary by Amy Gutmann and others (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 25–73; 65.

6   Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 26.

expressed by authors like Herder and Rousseau. They related the desire for recognition to the appreciation of one's own specific "particularity".

Taylor's reference to Herder makes clear that a particular identity is able to assume not only individual form, but also a collective one. Herder not only posits that every individual has its own "measure", but also that every people has to remain faithful to itself, that is, its own culture.[7] After all, authenticity as moral ideal means that "there is a certain way of being human which is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's life."[8] "But this notion", Taylor establishes, "gives a new importance to being true to oneself. If I am not, I miss the point in my life; I miss what being human is for *me*."[9] The demand for recognition of (my) uniqueness is however not a return to honour-related recognition. After all, authenticity is also a universalistic ideal and not a demand for privilege, or, in Montesquieu's terminology, for *préférences et distinctions*.[10] Paul Ricoeur succinctly remarks in his reading of Taylor: "It is collectively, one could say, that we demand an individualizing recognition."[11]

Taylor discusses the ideal of authenticity a number of times in his oeuvre, more recently also its religious version.[12] To him, it is an ideal which we are no longer able to reverse, since it has been widely embraced since the 1960s. Whereas this ideal for authenticity is a legacy of Romanticism,[13] the demand for the equal dignity of all humans and citizens is rather a fruit of the Enlightenment. Later in his text Taylor specifically refers to Kant and the liberal tradition. In his attempts to do justice to both the Romantic

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7   Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 31.

8   Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 30.

9   Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 30.

10   Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 27.

11   Ricoeur, *The Course*, p. 214.

12   See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1991); *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Bellknap Press, 2007), Ch.13, "The Age of Authenticity", pp. 473–505, in which he frequently ideal-typically also speaks of the "post-Durkheimian period", one in which religious authenticity is no longer coupled to political, especially national identity (as in the "neo-Durkheimian model"), but has become a personal quest. Further Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past", in Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 178–245; especially 207 ff.

13   See Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), especially Ch. 3, "Irony and authenticity", pp. 65–97.

and Enlightenment traditions, the Canadian also here shows himself a synthesizing thinker.[14]

The two traditions have also engendered two forms of politics and political struggle, a *politics of equal dignity* and a *politics of difference*. Already in 1992 Taylor was keenly aware that the tension between these two traditions could lead to conflicting claims and differences of opinion when it came to the implications, reach and boundaries of both forms of politics. Yet he maintained that the two forms are compatible, and to some extent even interwoven. Both are concerned with the idea of dignity and its implications for equality.[15] Just as much as we want to be recognized as the equal of others, we also want to be appreciated as particular persons or collectives with our own characters or "identities".

According to Taylor the notion of recognition presupposes the essentially "dialogical" and "linguistic" character of human life, and thus the diverse ways we understand and express ourselves. There is no such thing as monologically defining my authentic identity: precisely then, when we follow our "inner voice", we want others, and especially "significant" others, to recognize our choices, be it tacitly, by means of open dialogue, in negotiation or by disagreement. After all, identity cannot be completely separated from one's *roots*, "where we come from", and from a horizon of meaning, which, to Taylor, is "inescapable" for every human being.[16] What never ceases to be true, however, is that recognition could falter, and be met with refusal or lack of appreciation. Particularly in modern conditions, we are all at risk of becoming the "victims" (Taylor)[17] of someone or society. A refusal to recognize our uniqueness is experienced as a form of oppression. This is especially true with regard to intimate relationships which, not by chance, are seen as the key to self-discovery and self-appreciation. Taylor, however, largely concentrates on the two forms of politics of recognition in the public sphere.

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14 See Theo de Wit, "Tussen Scylla en Charybdis", in Ger Groot & Guido Vanheeswijck (red.), *Charles Taylor* (Utrecht: Klement, 2018), pp. 123–147, on Taylor's synthetical political philosophy.

15 See Ricoeur, *The Course*, p. 214.

16 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 33, and *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 31.

17 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 26.

The politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference

The two forms of politics of recognition may well have dignity as common denominator, but as soon as we raise the question of what exactly constitutes dignity, an important difference emerges between the struggles for equality on the one hand, and for the right to differ, or to be different, on the other. In the framework of a politics of equal dignity, respect is paid to a universal *potency*, in Kant, for instance, the ability to make use of one's rational faculties and to subject oneself to rational principles.[18] With equal civil rights now the objective, discrimination on the basis of gender, race or religion has become taboo. Also "positive discrimination" favouring historically disadvantaged groups in the population, could be legitimized from such a politics, for instance as mechanism to level the playing field.

In the framework of a "politics of difference", on the other hand, more is at play than the recognition of a universal human potential, or purely the power to define one's identity as person or group. At stake is the right to cherish the *incarnation* of this power in a culture or a religion, and to seek to protect and perpetuate it. Thus, the French Canadians demanded the right to promulgate legislation to ensure that there would still be French-speaking Canadians in future. In a politics of difference, it is not discrimination, but assimilation into a homogenous culture that is the "cardinal sin".[19]

It is on this point where these two forms of politics – as Taylor frankly admits – can come into conflict with one another. As soon as the politics of difference draws into question the "neutrality" of the politics of equality by posing that "the supposedly neutral set of difference-blind principles of the politics of equal dignity is in fact a reflection of one hegemonic culture"[20], universality may turn into a masked particularity. In the name of this kind of equality the particularity of minority cultures are oppressed and forced into the straightjacket of a homogenous unity.

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18 See especially Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Ethik und Religionsphilosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, where he develops our rational capacity to follow the categorical imperative: "Handle so, dass die maxime deines Willens jederzeit zugleich als prinzip einer allegemeinen gesetzgebung gelten könne" (p. 140)

19 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 38.

20 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 43.

This grave allegation Taylor thinks not undeserved in the case of Rousseau's model of equality politics. After all, Rousseau espoused an – also enforced – amalgamation of individual wills into the "common will".[21] In the case of a Kantian inspired politics of equality, matters are more nuanced because he skipped the dependence on the *Volonté Genérale* and Rousseau's demand for the total absence of differentiated roles. Thus Taylor,by drawing on examples from the earlier mentioned struggle of the French-speaking Canadians and also that of the Canadian First Peoples for cultural survival, distinguishes two "incompatible" versions of a liberal politics of equality. In the version of "procedural liberalism", individual rights and non-discriminatory measures always trump collective ones such as cultural *survivance*. The version termed "substantive liberalism" by Taylor posits that a liberal society could indeed be organised around a particular description of the good life. For example, Francophone Canada wishing to be recognized as a "distinct society".

According to this notion "a liberal society distinguishes itself as such by the way in which it treats minorities, including those who do not share public definitions of the good, and above all by the rights it accords to all of its members."[22] Taylor here has in mind basic rights such as that of life, freedom, due process, free expression of opinion, freedom of religion, etc. Although he acknowledges that the practical application of the substantive version could be accompanied by "tensions and difficulties", he thinks it allows one better to deal with the differences in our multicultural societies than a procedural version, one "inhospitable" to differences, and therefore unable to avoid the reproach of being a homogenising force.

The boundary of a politics of difference: against political correctness

It would therefore seem that Taylor – true to his "communitarianism", and his embrace of the modern ideal of authenticity – is justly viewed as a

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21 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 51: "In Rousseau, three things seem to be inseparable: freedom (nondomination), the absence of differentiated roles, and a very tight common purpose". And Taylor comments: "This has been the formula for the most terrible forms of homogenizing tyranny, starting with the Jacobins and extending to the totalitarian regimes of our century." See also my "Tussen Scylla en Charibdys" in Ger Groot et al *Charles Taylor*, especially the section entitled "Jacobijns-republikeinse interne uitsluiting en Rousseau's Volonté Générale", pp. 140–143.

22 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 59.

proponent of a multicultural politics of difference, albeit in a very specific sense. He defends (at least in the case of Francophone Quebec) a liberal politics which is not masked, but openly comes out for specific collective goals. And more in general he is of the opinion that western liberalism constitutes no neutral ground on which cultures could meet. Amongst other reasons,[23] this is because the liberal tradition is partly a result of Latin Christianity. In other words: "Liberalism is also a fighting creed".[24] This aspect came strongly to the fore during the Salman Rushdie affair,[25] when it became apparent that the separation of religion and politics was not in the least something to be taken for granted in Islam. Western liberalism had to "draw the line", since rights such as that of life and of freedom of expression were at stake.[26] Confronted with a call to murder "compromise is close to impossible here".[27] But does this mean that in Taylor's liberal society one could simply say to newcomers: "This is how things are done here, take it or leave"?

Both his embrace of the ethical ideal of authenticity and his political insight that a nationalism, which draws inspiration from this ideal "could break up" multi-national societies, however forces Taylor to pose a more incisive question. In as far as a refusal of recognition (of both personal

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23 The division of church and state, Taylor argues for example, "goes back to the earliest days of Christian civilization". (p. 62)

24 Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 62.

25 In 1989, Salman Rushdie learned that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had issued the extraordinary *fatwa* calling on Muslims all over the world to murder him and everyone else who had contributed to the publication of his latest novel, *The Satanic Verses*. For more than ten years, Rushdie lived under the surveillance of bodyguards, special drivers, and complicated police arrangements, until the British security experts finally determined that Iran's secret services and the Islamic Republic's Lebanese allies in Hezbollah no longer seemed to be fielding hit squads against him, and the risk of assassination had subsided to less than alarming levels.

26 Taylor here (p. 62) refers to a 1989 opinion piece by Larry Siedentop regarding western liberalism's "Christian connection". In the meantime, Siedentop has expanded his original article into a book: L. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual. The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2015).

27 This remark resulted in a critical reprimand by Brian Barry: that "compromise is close to impossibble here – one either forbids murder or allows it" as Taylor had written (p. 63) to Barry testifies to "a sad lack of imagination". By this logic, the British government could have settled with Iran "to remove some agreed portion of his anatomy – say the right arm". Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 298. By the way, on this point they were in agreement: in this case a compromise was unthinkable.

and collective identity) could be very harmful in multicultural and multinational societies, does this not imply that we should also recognize the equal value of other (sub)cultures and their traditions? Taylor's answer here is nuanced – already in 1992 he was acutely aware that we were here confronted with a pitfall of political correctness, a serious form of paternalism. "All the drawings are equally nice" my kindergarten used to say at the end of drawing period. With this she of course wanted to prop up the self-image of all her charges, but even as kids we understood that it was nothing but a well-intended lie.

A value judgement on the cultural accomplishments and traditions of other (sub)cultures, thus Taylor's answer, could of course not be made a priori. Such a value judgement demands a certain willingness, an "act of faith"[28] to seriously investigate those cultures – including our own western one – which have animated whole societies over long periods of time, in an attempt to broaden one's own horizons and to revise one's own standards. Only by means of this hermeneutic labour could one for instance revise the literary canon, and then not by means of an ethical imperative which in advance obliges a positive judgement. A half-baked positive judgement would not only be humiliating but also ethnocentric, even homogenising, "for it implies that we already possess the criteria with which to make such judgments."[29]

Should one then rather abandon one's intention to take other cultures seriously, and simply demand assimilation into the established dominant order? That is an attitude Taylor in 1992 saw represented in the opponents of multi-culturalism, one which has since then become fairly common amongst European politicians, policy-makers and intellectuals. And here Isaiah Berlin's remark[30] that Taylor is a "teleologically thinking Christian"

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28   Taylor, "The politics of Recognition", p. 66. Thus Herman De Dijn's agreement on this point, "Politiek van de erkenning en multiculturalisme", in Stefaan E. Cuypers & Willen Lemmens (red.), *Charles Taylor: een mozaïek van zijn Denken* (Pelckmans, 1997), pp. 141–57; 151: "Taylor's thought that traditions deserve appreciation seems justified to me".

29   Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 71.

30   Sir Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction", in: James Tully (ed.), *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism. The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–3, 1. It is common knowledge that Taylor is a Roman Catholic, who defends a "catholic modernity", the most explicit in "A Catholic Modernity?", in James L. Heft

indeed cuts the ice. Ultimately Taylor's willingness to take other cultures seriously from an assumption "of equal worth" is *theologically* inspired. It is no coincidence that he refers to Herder, who "had a view of divine providence, according to which all this variety of culture was not merely accident but was meant to bring about a greater harmony. I can't rule out such a view."[31]

3. The basic principles of secular democracy

As mentioned earlier, a modern democracy which derives its legitimacy from the sovereignty of the people not only requires basic rights and just processes, but also patriotism, the bond experienced with a specific community. Such a democracy cannot allow itself to alienate any particular population groups; no second-class citizens should ever be created. The ideal of authenticity adds further weight to this task. It seems to provide both newcomers and patriots the moral right to live out their identities, rooted in their own particular horizons of meaning. As Taylor frequently emphasises, authenticity after all presupposes a horizon of meaning and values which transcend the individual, and which also makes demands upon him or her.[32] But could solidarity with a democratic community be reconciled with following "one's own way" and particular horizons of meaning? This question has been raised from all sides over the past decades, and with ever-increasing urgency.

Especially during the last decade Taylor felt obliged to re-examine the ideas of "secularism" (*laïcité*) and "secular state", no doubt also due to the fact that religious identities and demands emanating from a religious horizon of meaning have been moving up on the global political agenda. The Rushdie affair in 1989 was for many observers the start of a new era of religious wars, or of "the clash of civilizations", increasingly defined along (quasi-)religious fault lines.

(ed), *Charles Taylor, A Catholic Modenity. Charles Taylor's Mariansit Award Lecture*, with responses by William M. Shea *et al.* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 13–37.

31   Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", p. 72.

32   Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, especially "Inescapable Horizons", pp. 31–41.

Taylor's political-philosophical interventions in this regard are twofold. First of all, he proposes redefining of the concept "secular state".[33] He then, in collaboration with his Canadian colleague Jocelyn Maclure, compiled and elaborated a number of principles for dealing with moral and religious diversity in practice.[34] I will briefly discuss the core of both interventions.

In both interventions Taylor proposes that we detach our idea of "secularism" and secular democracy from a fixation on religion, one rooted in circumstances peculiar to western history. The long struggle to forge a secular state started in the United States and France, both contexts in which versions of the Christian religion were dominant. In these contexts, "secular" came to mean that the state no longer retains any bond with any specific creed (or retains purely a ceremonial bond), and in this sense, becomes "neutral". The word "secular" is somewhat "ethnocentric", establishes Taylor, for after all, it originally referred to developments within (early) Christianity.[35]

In both France and America this fixation on religion has led to the misconception that only "reason" – or rational *laïcité* – could provide the foundation for the state's intercourse with, and control of creeds and religions. This conception is seen by Taylor in France in the Jacobin tradition, and in the United States in the early works of John Rawls.

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33 Charles Taylor, "Why we need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism", in E. Mendieta and J. Vanantwerpen (ed.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 34–59. Also see Taylor, "What does Secularism Mean?", in *Dilemmas and Connections. Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England, 2011), pp. 303–325; and Taylor, "How to define Secularism?", in Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor (ed.), *Boundaries of Toleration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 59–79. The last two texts largely overlap with the article mentioned first.

34 Jocely Maclure & Charles Taylor, *Laïcité et liberté de conscience* (Montreal: Les Éditions du Boréal, 2010); I quote from the English translation: *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011).

35 See for instance M. Riedl's recent investigation ("The Secular Sphere in Western Theology: a Historical Reconsideration", in P. Losonczi et al (ed.), *The Future of Political Theology* (England: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 11–22, in which he defends the position that secularisation (in the sense of desacralisation) of political power already found "completion" in the church fathers of North-Africa, especially St Augustine – only after the Church's reversal of fortunes under Emperor Constantine turn did a "re-spritualizing" of politics emerge.

Ironically enough, in France this conception has led to *laïcité* becoming a kind of "rational theology". A situation similar to Kemal Atatürk's Turkey never having been a truly secular state, but much rather a form of state-*laïcité* with all the trappings of a *civil religion*. In a recent book Martha Nussbaum describes the French *laïcité*-system as "the establishment of non-religion".[36] From within a fixation on religion, it was assumed that the practical problems of a multicultural context could be resolved by the strict application of mantras such as *laïcité*, "separation of church and state", or "Wall of Separation".

According to Taylor the real dilemmas only become visible when one a) broadens "secularism", and redefines it as the proper way of interacting with the "diversity" of life views, and b) accept that *several* principles are at play when we are looking for answers to concrete issues engendered by the practice of actual co-existence.[37] Such a redefining would first of all entail that the state's "neutrality" is not only accorded to religion, but, in Rawls' words, extended to "all comprehensive views of the good". Secondly, in terms of the relevant principles, Taylor and Maclure make a distinction between crucial moral principles, and the institutional arrangements which enable their realization.

They mention two major moral principles: the equal moral worth of all citizens (in other words, *equal respect* accorded by the state to all its citizens), and *freedom of conscience*. Thanks to two institutional arrangements, implementation of these principles is also possible. In pluralistic societies, separation of church and state is meant to guarantee equal dignity, while the state's neutrality is to see to it that certain (groups of) citizens are not relegated to second-class citizens or suffer any restraint of conscience. The state identifies itself with no particular life view. And its laws can no more decree that: "whereas the Bible tells us that", than: "whereas Marx has shown that religion is the opium of the people" or: "whereas Kant has shown that the only thing good without qualification is a good will".[38]

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36 Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance. Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Dutch translation, *De nieuwe intolerantie: een uitweg uit de politiek van de angst* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2013), p. 116 and p. 157.

37 "Why we need", p. 36.

38 "Why we need", p. 50; *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, pp. 75–80.

The fact that the interpretation of these institutional arrangements could evidently differ from context to context, shows us that in multi-religious contexts we are dealing with real dilemmas. Thus, one could argue that a Muslim teacher at a (European) public school wearing a headscarf harms the school's neutrality, thus infringing on the norm that public institutions treat all citizens exactly the same. But would banning headscarves in this context not constitute a violation of the freedom of religion and conscience, and in certain instances, even equal opportunities for all citizens?[39] That France, Germany and the United Kingdom have come to different conclusions in this matter,[40] shows how the interpretation of institutional principles can differ, sometimes fundamentally so. *Laïcité* and the "separation of church and state" therefore are no magic words with which to settle moral dilemmas. According to Taylor, the only possibly remaining watchword is to continue striving for "maximal compatibility".

Maclure and Taylor name two further moral principles, both strongly interwoven with Taylor's political-philosophical position.[41] His third principle holds that in the development of the "political identity" of a society and its juridical consequences, "all spiritual families must be heard", while the fourth principle asks of us "to maintain relations of harmony and comity between the supports of different religions and *Weltanschauungen*".[42] While Maclure and Taylor view the last two moral principles as concretising the *fraternité* of the French Revolution, the first two may be said to correspond to the *liberté* and *egalité* of the famous French trinity.

Indeed, when modern democracy, which – more than pre-modern and authoritarian political configurations – is based on a "people" as deliberating unit with a "will" and a "political identity", and furthermore on "trust" amongst its citizens (Taylor's terms for describing Western democracy)[43] –

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39 See especially Micheline Milot, *La Laïcité* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2008).

40 Taylor remembers us that in France, pupils and teachers were forbidden the headscarf, in certain German Länder, pupils can wear it, but not teachers, while in the UK and other countries (like the Netherlands, TdW) there is no general verdict, but the individual schools can decide. ("Why we need", 41)

41 See my "Tussen Scylla en Charybdis", in Groot, *Charles Taylor*, pp. 123–146.

42 "Why we need", p. 35.

43 "Why we need", pp. 43–44.

then fraternity and a willingness to listen are indeed estimable democratic virtues.

At the same time, the seduction of a certain "fetishizing" of political identity becomes understandable. In contemporary France for instance, Taylor sees the tendency to elevate *laïcité* to the position of something "untouchable", with a "quasi-sacred status".[44] This tendency he calls "very understandable", but also "one illustration of a general truth: that contemporary democracies, as they progressively diversify, will have to undergo redefinitions of their historical identities, which may be far-reaching and painful."[45] After all, by "fetishizing" any specific incarnation of political identity, one runs the risk of repressing the moral dilemmas of a truly pluralist society, and thereby of undermining the possibility of peaceful co-existence in diversity. Rawls' model of political identity based on the overlapping consensus achieved by the voices of atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Catholics and many more life views also being heard, could, according to Taylor, be useful in redefining a political identity: "We are condemned to live an overlapping consensus".[46] Taylor proposes the same model in the search for a peaceful international consensus on human rights.[47]

4. Three side notes

I conclude with three side notes on Taylor's thinking on identity and democratic legitimacy, all three of which raise doubts concerning his version of a multi-cultural politics of recognition. The first concerns the unforeseeable consequences of politicising cultural heritages, the second the task of the democratic state in a society marked by "deep diversity", while the third looks at the limitations of Taylor's ideal of authenticity.

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44 "Why we need", p. 46.

45 "Why we need", p. 46.

46 "Why we need", p. 48; and Taylor and Maclure, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, p. 107.

47 Charles Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights", in: *Dilemmas and Connections*, pp. 105–123; 105 and 122,

The politicisation of culture

I started this contribution with the statement that to most political parties in Europe, multi-culturalism as political programme had lost its appeal. The multi-cultural society has lost its former shine, it has become problematic and burdensome. In phenomenological approaches, societies like ours are frequently described in stark terms as a fragmented reality, like a "broken window pane" lying on the ground, while the fragments intentionally and unintentionally damage one another.[48] In such a society the politeness between the major spiritual families which Taylor considers so essential in our permanent quest for collective identity, has become displaced by a grim assertiveness – one which sometimes spills over into daydreams entertaining the disappearance of the strange, annoying or dangerous other. And not infrequently, these daydreams culminate in the demand for greater homogeneity, one not based on the vision of a multi-coloured future, but on nostalgia for a vanished state of greater uniformity.

In *A Secular Age* (2007) also Taylor recognizes that the "secular times" in which we live constitute an era in which diverse religions and anti-religions are quick to irritate or make another "fragile" – "naïve" belief or un-belief has become a rarity.[49] In light of this recent development, Taylor's plea for a "politics of difference" at a first glance appears naïve. It seems to have seriously underestimated one potential consequence. The willingness to accommodate minorities, immigrants and historically disadvantaged groups by sympathetically investigating their cultural uniqueness from the perspective of a new common value horizon, not only brings into play these groups, but also the native populations and ethnocentrists of the various host nations.

Already in the 1980s, Jean-Marie Le Pen – then leader of the far-right *Front National*, which he would remain until passing the baton to his daughter Marine in 2011 – had an acute feel for appropriating the arguments of multi-culturalists, thus avoiding explicitly espousing – no longer publicly tolerated – racist notions. "You defend the right to be different? So, do we!" Listening to Le Pen and his contemporary ilk in many European countries,

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48   This is the image used by for instance Rudi Visker: Theo de Wit, "De samenleving is een gebroken ruit", *Filosofie Magazine* 5/2008, pp. 56–58.

49   Taylor, *Een seculiere tijd*, pp. 55, 729.

one hears: "People cannot be simply qualified as superior or inferior. They are different, and one has to take into account these physical and cultural differences."[50] The underlying principle of multi-culturalism (the "right to differ"), inclusive of a romantic concept of culture ("our utterances are by necessity the expressions of a certain culture"), is being endorsed, just as in Taylor – with the salient difference that the political conclusions of the extreme far-right and that of the hospitable multi-culturalist diametrically differ. The conclusion these representatives of a "racism without race" arrive at, is that it would be a tragic error to allow societies from different civilizations to live amongst one another, for clashes would then become unavoidable. "France for the French", "own people first", etc now become the slogans. And thus, multiculturism flips over into the culturalism of the native majority.

Also, a recent diagnosis of the past American elections puts the finger on the boomerang-effect of the rhetoric of diversity. Whoever in the US – like Hillary Clinton – comes up for (disadvantaged) groups, "better name them all", writes the American political philosopher Mark Lilla, "otherwise those not mentioned may notice, and take exception. That explains what has now happened with the white working class and people with strong religious convictions.[51]

Thus, the net-result of a politics of diversity ultimately threatens to culminate in a society where everyone is able to feel him- or herself a victim – minorities of majorities, but also *vice versa*. In my opinion, this evolution is strengthened by the dominance of a liberalism which has abandoned the idea that any consensus regarding "the good life" is possible, and now only appeals to a negative consensus: not to harm one another – in other words, John Stuart Mill's famous *harm-principle*. In line with this, the Dutch sociologist of law Hans Boutellier in 1993 pleaded for a "liberalism of the victim", in which victimhood would be the "flag" of

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50 Jean-Marie Le Pen, Quoted in Pierre-André Taguieff, "Réflexions sur la question antiraciste", in: *Lignes. Revue* no. 12, "Penser le racisme", Dec. 1990, pp. 5–53; 42.

51 Mark Lilla, "Stop met dat rampzalige vieren van verschillen", in *NRC-Handelsblad*, 6-12-2016, pp. 16–17.

a kind of minimum-morality. With this, society is implicitly viewed as a collection of potential victims rather than a community of citizens.[52]

As noted earlier, Taylor has always resisted this kind of liberalism, and maybe in the meantime has also come to agree with Lilla that a politics of identity is "more about bearing testimony than about convincing", and that national politics should be concerned not with "the difference", but with what is held in common. That would bring to the fore those who best express the American vision of a shared destiny."[53]

The state and the public domain in pluralistic societies

Under conditions of "deep" pluralism, Taylor's secular-democratic state certainly faces a complex task. It has to allow all families of life views to be heard without itself becoming partisan, forge an overlapping consensus and political identity which allows all citizens to experience themselves as part of the political community, while simultaneously allowing every citizen to find his or her own orientation without becoming paternalistic or intrusive. Taylor's state has much in common with that of his French colleague Marcel Gauchet, to whom the contemporary state most of all needs to be "gymnastic": as a discrete, no longer eminent, but definitely "solid" transcendent power it needs to ensure that particular identities do not oppress one another, and that co-existence remains possible." [54]

In our turbulent times (the threat of terror, the rise of authoritarian regimes), how could the solidity of the state be reinforced? Of greatest importance is that the public domain functions well. Taylor describes the public domain, a central characteristic of democratic societies, as "a *common space*" in which members of society meet, whether face to face, or by means of a variety of (printed and electronic) media.[55]

52　Hans Boutellier, *Solidariteit en slachtofferschap. De morele betekenis van criminaliteit in een postmoderne cultuur* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1993); and my analysis: Th. de Wit, "De Assepoester van het strafrecht bevrijden. Over de geboorte van het slachtofferpopulisme uit de geest van het postmodernisme", in J. Ouwerkerk et al, *Hoe te reageren op misdaad?* (Den Haag: Sdu uitgevers, 2013), pp. 51–66.

53　Lilla, "Stop met dat rampzalige vieren van verschillen", p. 17.

54　Marcel Gauchet, *La Religion dans la Démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

55　Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere", in: Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), pp. 257–287; 259.

On this point, Taylor's approach could benefit from elaboration and correction from the Republican tradition (in which tradition the Canadian philosopher wants to be placed!), a tradition with great sensitivity for the formal and ritual aspects of the democratic constitutional state and the public domain. In this tradition, democracy and the constitutional state's exclusive task are to give expression to all of society's opinions and positions. They also fulfil a wholly unique role, by imposing a specific *format* to social differences and conflicts. That is why someone like Hannah Arendt speaks of the political space as a *space of appearance*, a theatre in which citizens, by means of words or deeds, act in the presence of others.[56] Freedom is not so much an attribute or possession of individuals acting within this space, but rather something which takes place between them; after all, in the arguments and exchange of perspectives, something new may be born.[57] Also justice is more than the solidified expression of the dominant sense of justice or the current portrayal of man, at the same time it constitutes a *format* which gives space to parties by simultaneously separating and uniting them, whereby the law also becomes a factor in our experience and understanding of ourselves.[58]

All of this becomes of even greater importance in a pluralistic society which has embraced Taylor's ideal of authenticity, and where one's own identity is being individually or collectively experienced and expressed. As such, the public spaces threaten to become the extension or enlargement of individual, particular meanings, collective identities or chosen religions: whoever makes the biggest noise determines the political agenda. This tendency is further strengthened by the currently advancing (populist) conception of democracy whereby it is viewed as a direct reflection of the popular will, without the "static interference" of mediating authorities or representative

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56 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), V, "Action", especially p. 28, "Power and the Space of Appearance", pp. 199–207.

57 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, and Rudi Visker, *Lof der Zichtbaarheid. Een uitleiding in de hedendaagse wijsbegeerte*, (Amsterdam: SUN), especially Chapter 1, pp. 33–68.

58 For this conception, see Dorien Pessers, *De rechtsstaat voor beginners* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2011); and Th.W.A. de Wit, "De publieke ruimte: geluidsversterker of bliksemafleider? Over de omgang met (anti-)religieuze diversiteit", in; Rudi te Velde (red.), *Tussen geloof en ongeloof. Religie en geloof in een seculiere Wêreld* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2015), pp. 69–89.

bodies. In today's turbulent times it may well be democracy's salvation if the expressivist idea of freedom and authenticity was to find its counter-balance in democracy seen as ritual and "cult"[59], of a public sphere in which we need to learn to develop some *distance* to our secular, religious and anti-religious identities in order to get down to tackling society's practical problems.

5.   Authenticity: the inheritances of Romanticism

The focus on diversity, Lilla establishes in his earlier-quoted diagnosis of the US Presidential election, "in our schools and press has brought forth a generation of narcissist liberalists who remain unaware of conditions outside of their defined groups, and who do not feel themselves in the least called upon to reach out a hand to Americans of all sorts and sizes." With this I have arrived at my third marginal note, the lurking potential reverse of a morality of authenticity. From the start Taylor was aware of potential shadow sides – narcissism, hedonism, egocentrism, sentimentalism. In *The Ethics of Authenticity* he dedicated a whole chapter to the ideal of authenticity's "slide" towards "subjectivism".[60]

The central, and also politically important point of criticism of authenticity-turned-subjectivism, is time and again that the concentration on one's own or our own identity promotes an instrumental approach to common reality: does this world and this society give me the space in which to be myself? And how could I make society conform to me, thus allowing me to also gild my rights to uniqueness and feeling secure? Responsive politics and authorities therefore often tend to lean towards therapeutic management interventions aimed at keeping intact the self-esteem of society's diverse groups.[61]

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59   Also see: Marin Terpstra, *Democratie als cultus. Over politiek en religie* (Amsterdam: Boom, Amsterdam, 2010).

60   Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, "The Slide to Subjectivism", pp. 55–71.

61   See Frank Furedi's critique of a certain "sliding" of tolerance into therapeutical care in his *On Tolerance*: *A Defense of Moral Independence* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

In order not to lose the baby of the ideal of authenticity along with the bath water of "the ghettoizing"[62] of identities, Taylor introduces the following distinction. In as far as the *manner* or the way in which one embraces a life goal or -view is concerned, authenticity does indeed refer to oneself: it is *my* choice, *my* orientation. But that does not at all mean that also the *content* of this orientation needs to refer to myself – as was already hinted at by Taylor's reference to "inescapable horizons of meaning". Moreover, Taylor is of the opinion that we only find true fulfilment in something which has meaning separately from ourselves and our desires, such as a political cause, nature, our heritage, or God. These referents have meanings which transcend one's own choices and will.[63]

It is not without political significance that *My Way* – Frank Sinatra's famous ode to the ideal of authenticity – was later also appropriated by the anarchic British punk band *Sex Pistols*, if admittedly in a racier version. This – admittedly somewhat anecdotal – fact illustrates that the ideal of authenticity in our part of the world – in Taylor's opinion even world-wide[64] – has become well-nigh inescapable. Even a conservative commentator of Taylor's theory of recognition like the Belgian philosopher Herman De Dijn has to admit that "it is nowadays virtually impossible not to be influenced by this quest."[65] I suspect it is as a result of the serious shadow sides of identity politics and the – misunderstood – ideal of authenticity that, towards the end of *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor calls upon us to keep on disputing the definition and meaning of authenticity.[66] I therefore here give a hint – nothing more – at a potentially alternative conception of authenticity.

Towards the end of his study on the inheritance of Romanticism, Charles Larmore makes a statement which gives a radical twist to the ideal of authenticity – which he, just like Taylor, first sees expressed in Rousseau

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62 That is the term used by Taylor in "Interculturalism or Multiculturalism?", paper delivered on 4 June 2013, published in *Philosophy* & *Social Criticism*, Vol. 38, no. 4–5 (May 2012): 413–424; 413.

63 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, pp. 81–82.

64 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 74, where he speaks of "one of the important potentialities of human life".

65 Herman de Dijn, "Politiek van de erkenning", p. 144.

66 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 73.

and Herder. For this he turns to Romantic authors like Stendhal, Heinrich von Kleist and Marcel Proust. They do not conceive of authenticity as "going one's own way" – in other words, not living one's life to the expectations of others – on the basis of self-chosen goals or ideals, but rather pointing towards a sensitivity or openness to the surprises which life has in store, in other words, a certain passivity or receptivity. Thus, Stendhal not only opposes authenticity – *le naturel* in his words – to the expectations of others, but also to "l'esprit de l'analyse", that is, to reflexivity. Authenticity is therefore a matter of being sensitive to the unexpected, akin to being in love.[67] Especially in a later article on this question Larmore invokes this tradition against Rawls' ethical rationalism and its central notion of a "life plan" which we are supposed to develop and live by.[68]

In this light, also Taylor's authenticity ideal remains too one-sidedly rationalistic. As Larmore puts it: a life worth living is "a life that is not just led but met with as well", one which also plays havoc with our plans. And that not only because, once we try and realise them, all our major life plans remain precarious undertakings, but – more fundamentally – because we miss out on something of great importance when we only view life as a matter of prudence, prevention and control.[69]

This "unexpected" is also at the centre of gravity of the substantial oeuvre produced by George Bataille – a twentieth century French surrealist, romantic and "pupil" of Nietzsche – and who, by the way, is not mentioned by Larmore. Bataille's numerous texts[70] – on almost every conceivable topic – all essentially point to the same: we humans are not only "servile" beings (human capital aimed at the future, concerned with and striving towards a rationally transparent world), but also "sovereign" ones (aimed at useless pursuits; self-giving, self-overspilling, self-losing, thrill-seeking, playful, art-making, death-fascinated, Dionysian). As motto for his

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67 Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy*, p. 86.

68 Also see Charles Larmore, "The Idea of a Life Plan", in: *Social Philosophy* & *Policy*, 1, no. (1999): 96–112; and Martin Seel, "Aktive und passive Selbstbestimmung", in: *Merkur*, 54, no. 7, 2000, 626–632; Th.W.A. de Wit, "Autonomie voorbij ascese en assertiviteit", in *Humanistiek* no. 30 (July 2007): 88–96.

69 Larmore, "The Idea of a life Plan", p. 97–98.

70 But see especially: Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Gallimard: Paris, 1973, Part VIII, "La souveraineté", p. 243–453.

considerations concerning the one-sidedness of thinking in terms of a "life plan", Larmore here takes a quote from Proust: "In exchange for what our imagination leads us to expect (…) life gives us something which we could never have imagined."[71]

This idea of authenticity as openness towards what is *impossible et pourtant là* ("impossible yet *there*") (Bataille), is not afflicted by the shadow side of narcissism and subjectivism, rather, it breaks through it. However, according to Bataille, a social and political failure to recognize humanity's sovereign side and the aspect of "unproductive living" could result in sovereignty assuming destructive and catastrophic forms – of which the outrageous lyrics of the *Sex Pistols*' take on *My Way* (*today I killed a cat*, *but dare I say*, *I did it my way* …) is but a tame example, with suicide cults and snuff pornography more towards the other end of the spectrum. Bataille himself saw the roots of a morality of sovereignty already in the words of the Gospel: "Look at the birds of the field" (Mt 6:26) Here, as prompted by Taylor, the conversation on true authenticity needs to be continued.

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71 Larmore, "The idea of a Life Plan", p. 96.

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