

# SECULARISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

Charles Taylor

I believe that secularism and multiculturalism are converging. Put somewhat less enigmatically, the issues about the proper regime of secularism in Western democracies are becoming and more and more interwoven with issues about the proper ways to deal with the growing diversity of these societies.

1

Everyone agrees today that modern, diverse democracies have to be “secular” in some sense of this term. But in what sense? The term (along with the corresponding French term *laïcité*, and its derivatives) has more than one sense. There are in fact many different meanings, but I believe that we can get to a crucial issue if we single out two key conceptions.

On one view A, secularism is mainly concerned with controlling religion. Its task is to define the place of religion in public life, and to keep it firmly in this place. This doesn't need to involve strife or repression, provided various religious actors understand and respect these limits. But the various rules and measures which make up the secularist (or *laïque*) regime all have this basic purpose.

In the other view B, the main point of a secularist regime is to manage the religious and metaphysical-philosophical diversity of views (including non- and anti-religious views) fairly and democratically. Of course, this task will include setting certain limits to religiously motivated action in the public sphere, but it will also involve similar limits on those espousing non- or anti-religious philosophies. (For instance, the degree to which either can discriminate in certain relations, like hiring.) For B, religion is not the prime focus of secularism.

The case I would like to make here is that B is much superior to A, at least for our time. The popularity of A is to be explained by certain Western histories of struggle in which secularist regimes came to be. But our present predicament is for the most part rather different from the one which generated these conflicts. It is above all one of growing diversity in all Western democracies. For these reasons, B is more appropriate.

2

Let's look at what B involves a little more closely. In fact managing diversity involves a complex requirement. There is more than one good sought here. We can single out three, which we can class in the three categories of the French Revolutionary trinity: liberty, equality, fraternity.

1. No-one must be forced in the domain of religion, or basic belief. This is what is often defined as religious liberty, including of course, the freedom not to believe. This is what is also described as the "free exercise" of religion, in the terms of the United States First Amendment.
2. There must be equality between people of different faiths or basic belief; no religious outlook or (religious or areligious) *Weltanschauung* can enjoy a privileged status, let alone be adopted as the official view of the state.
3. All spiritual families must be heard and included in the

ongoing process of determining what the society is about (its political identity), and how it is going to realize these goals (the exact regime of rights and privileges). This (stretching the point a little) is what corresponds to “fraternity.”

These goals can, of course, conflict; sometimes we have to balance the goods involved here. Moreover, I believe that we might add a fourth goal: that we try as much as possible to maintain relations of harmony and comity between the supporters of different religions and *Weltanschauungen* (maybe this is what really deserves to be called “fraternity,” but I am still attached to the neatness of the above schema, with only the three traditional goods.)

## **The main point of a secularist regime is to manage the religious and metaphysical-philosophical diversity of views fairly and democratically**

Why do I think that this diversity model B is superior to the religion-focused model A? One reason is that it is more even-handed. If we look at the three goals above, they are concerned respectively with 1. protecting people in their belonging and/or practice of whatever outlook they choose or find themselves in; 2. treating people equally whatever their option; and 3. giving them all a hearing. There is no reason to single out religious, as against non-religious, “secular” (in another widely used sense), or atheist viewpoints.

Indeed, the point of state neutrality is precisely to avoid favoring or disfavoring not just religion positions, but any basic position, religious or non-religious. We can’t favor Christianity over Islam, but neither can we favor religion over non-belief in religion, or vice versa.

One of the ways of demonstrating the superiority of the three-principle model of secularism, over that which is fixated on religion, is that it would never allow one to fail to recognize the regime founded by Atatürk as genuinely secular, making light as it does of the fundamental principles, and even of the separation of state and religious institutions.

This also shows the value of the late-Rawlsian formulation for a secular state. This cleaves very strongly to certain political principles: human rights, equality, the rule of law, democracy. These are the very basis of the state, which must support them. But this political ethic can be and is shared by people of very different basic outlooks—what Rawls (1963) calls “comprehensive views of the good.” A Kantian will justify the rights to life and freedom by pointing to the dignity of rational agency; a Utilitarian will speak of the need to treat beings who can experience joy and suffering in such a way as to maximize the first and minimize the second. A Christian will speak of humans as made in the image of God. They concur on the principles, but differ on the deeper reasons for holding to this ethic. The state must uphold the ethic, but must refrain from favoring any of the deeper reasons.

3

The idea that secularism makes a special case of religion arises from the history of its coming to be in the West (as does, indeed, the name). To put it briefly, there are two important founding contexts for this kind of regime, the United States and France. In the United States case, the whole range of comprehensive views, or deeper reasons, were in the original case variants of (Protestant) Christianity, stretching to a smattering of Deists. Subsequent history has widened the palette of views beyond Christianity, and then beyond religion. But in the original case, the positions between which the state had to be neutral were all religious.

Hence the First Amendment: Congress shall pass no law establishing religion or impeding the free exercise thereof (or something like that).

The word “secularism” didn’t appear in the early decades of American public life. But this was an indication that a basic problem had not yet been faced. Because the First Amendment concerned the separation of church and state, it opened the possibility of giving a place to *religion* which no-one would accept today. Thus in the 1830s, a judge of the Supreme Court could argue that while the First Amendment forbade the identification of the federal government with any church, since all the churches were Christian (and in effect Protestant), one could invoke the principles of Christianity in interpreting the law.

For Judge Joseph Story, the goal of the First Amendment was “to exclude all rivalry among Christian sects,” but nevertheless “Christianity ought to receive encouragement from the state.” Christianity was essential to the state because the belief in “a future state of rewards and punishments” is “indispensable to the administration of justice.” What is more, “it is impossible for those who believe in the truth of Christianity as a divine revelation to doubt that it is a special duty of government to foster and encourage it among the citizens.<sup>1</sup>”

This primacy of Christianity was upheld even later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As late as 1890, 37 of the 42 existing states recognized the authority of God in the preambles or in the text of their constitutions. A unanimous judgment of the Supreme Court of 1892 declared that if one wanted to describe “American life as expressed by its laws, its business, its customs and its society, we find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth ... that this is a Christian nation” (*Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 United States 457 at 471).

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Koppelman. “Rawls and Habermas” 36.

In the latter part of the century, resistance to this conception began to build, but a National Reform Association was founded in 1863 with the following goal:

The object of this Society shall be to maintain existing Christian features in the American government ... to secure such an amendment to the Constitution of the United States as will declare the nation's allegiance to Jesus Christ and its acceptance of the moral laws of the Christian religion, and so as to indicate that this is a Christian nation, and place all the Christian laws, institutions, and usages of our government on an undeniable legal basis in the fundamental law of the land.

After 1870, the battle was joined between the supporters of this narrow view, on one hand, and those who wanted a real opening to all other religions and also to non-religion. These included not only Jews, but also Catholics who (rightly) saw the “Christianity” of the NRA as excluding them. It was in this battle that the word “secular” first appears on the American scene as a key term, and very often in its polemical sense of non- or anti-religious.<sup>2</sup>

In the French case, *laïcité* came about in a struggle against a powerful church. The strong temptation was for the state itself to stand on a moral basis independent from religion. Marcel Gauchet shows how Renouvier laid the ground for the outlook of the Third Republic radicals in their battle against the church. The state has to be “moral et enseignant.” It has “charge d’âmes aussi bien que toute Église ou communauté, mais à titre plus universel.” Morality is the key criterion. In order not to be under the church, the state must have “une morale indépendante de toute religion,”

<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith (2003). See also Tisa Wenger, “Rewriting the First Amendment: Competing American Secularisms, 1850–1900.”

and enjoy a “suprématie morale” in relation to all religions. The basis of this morality is liberty. In order to hold its own before religion, the morality underlying the state has to be based on more than just utility or feeling; it needs a real “théologie rationnelle,” like that of Kant (Gauchet 1998). The wisdom of Jules Ferry, and later of Aristide Briand and Jean Jaurez, saved France at the time of the Separation (1905) from such a lop-sided regime, but the notion stuck that *laïcité* was all about controlling and managing religion.

If we move, however, beyond such originating contexts and look at the kinds of societies we are now living in in the West, the first feature that strikes us is the wide diversity, not only of religious views, but also of those which involve no religion, not to speak of those which are unclassifiable in this dichotomy. Reasons 1, 2 and 3 above require that we treat all of these even-handedly.

4

The distinction between A and B is not one between actual regimes of secularism. Rather it concerns the way of posing the questions which underlie any regime, or perhaps better, the structure of the argument that one has to make for any measure. In fact regimes justified by A or B can be more or less restrictive or permissive. But the public discussion which defines and sustains them will be different nevertheless.

In terms of the main argument, secularism A usually raises issues of toleration. Religion is seen as something dangerous or potentially damaging; it must thus be contained. Questions of the following form thus easily arise: should we (the government, the majority) impose all the restrictions we might need in order to be quite secure against whatever

dangers religion poses? Or should we nevertheless hold back, be more permissive, for the sake of social peace or harmonious relations, or in order to avoid imposing excessive burdens on those who practise it? We can easily recognize here the shape of the debate in certain societies between extreme secularists and more moderate elements. This kind of issue is clearly one concerning toleration.

In contrast, secularism B plainly supposes a regime of equal rights. The main aim is to defend everyone's right to freedom, to equality, to a hearing. It thus supposes a situation in which we are "beyond toleration," where people will tend to feel that being tolerated is giving them less than they deserve as rights bearers.

### **The main aim is to defend everyone's right to freedom, to equality, to a hearing**

Of course, A and B offer ideal types. In any real situation there may be some elements of each. Thus in a society where B dominates in the public discussion, there may be special issues where questions of toleration arise. For instance, in the United Kingdom a few years ago, a question arose about religiously sponsored adoption agencies. From the standpoint of our present definitions of equality, one could argue that these agencies should be ready to serve all couples, whether of the traditional man-woman kind, or gay. Catholic adoption agencies found this demand hard to accept. Should they be forbidden to operate on their traditional basis? Now this kind of operation was being defined as unacceptable, precisely in a society founded on equal rights. The argument for not forbidding it (which lost) thus was being framed as one of toleration: in spite of the good reasons to forbid, one might let it be, for the sake of harmony, or social peace, or to avoid offending the susceptibilities of certain citizens.



The real world is extremely complex, but there is something to be gained by asking: what should the structure of argument be in general, and in each case?

5

This fixation on religion is complex, and it is bound up with two other features we often find in the debates on secularism: the first is the tendency to define secularism or *laïcité* in terms of some institutional arrangement, rather than starting from the goals I proposed above. And so you hear mantra-type formulae, like “the separation of church and state,” or the necessity of removing religion from public space (“les espaces de la République,” as in the recent French debate). The second follows on from the first, or may easily seem to. If the whole matter is defined by one institutional formula, then one must just determine which arrangement of things best meets this formula, and there is no need to think further. One cannot find oneself in a dilemma, as will easily happen if one is pursuing more than one goal, because here there is just one master formula.

Hence one often hears these mantras employed as argument-stoppers, the ultimate decisive response which annuls all objections. In the United States, people invoke the “Wall of Separation” as the ultimate criterion, and hyper-Republicans in France cite *laïcité* as the final word. (Of course, if one consulted the First Amendment of the United States Constitution one would find two goals mentioned, the rejection of establishment and the assurance of “free exercise.” It is not inconceivable that these could conflict.)

This kind of move amounts, from the standpoint I’m adopting here, to a fetishization of the favored institutional arrangements. Whereas one

should start from the goals, and derive the concrete arrangements from them. It is not that some separation of church and state, some mutual autonomy of governing and religious institutions, will not be an inescapable feature of any secularist regime. And the same goes for the neutrality of the public institutions. They are both indispensable. But what these requirements mean in practice ought to be determined by how we can maximize our three (or four) basic goals.

Take for example the wearing of the *hijab* by Muslim women in public schools, which has been a hot issue in a number of Western democracies. In France, pupils in public schools were famously forbidden the headscarf, seen as a “*signe religieux ostentatoire*,” according to the notorious Loi Stasi of 2004. In certain German *Länder*, pupils can wear it, but not teachers. In the United Kingdom and other countries, there is no general interdict, but the individual schools can decide.

What are the reasons for this variation? Plainly in all these cases, legislators and administrators were trying to balance two goals. One was the maintenance of neutrality in public institutions seen (rightly) as an essential entailment of goal 2: equality between all basic beliefs. The other was goal 1, ensuring the maximum possible religious liberty, or in its most general form, liberty of conscience. Goal 1 seems to push us towards permitting the *hijab* anywhere. But various arguments were made to override this in the French and German cases. For the Germans, what was disturbing was that someone in authority in a public institution should be religiously marked, as it were. In the French case, an attempt was made to cast doubt on the proposition that wearing the *hijab* was a free act. There were dark suggestions that the girls were being forced by their families, or by their male peers, to adopt this dress code. That was one argument which was frequently used, however dubious it might appear in the light of the sociological research carried out among the pupils themselves, which the Stasi Commission largely ignored.

The other main argument was that wearing of the headscarf in school was less an act of piety than a statement of hostility against the republic and its essential institution of *laïcité*. This was the meaning behind the introduction of the concept of “*signe ostentatoire*.” A smaller discrete sign would be no problem argued the Stasi Commission, but these attention-grabbing features of dress were meant to make a highly controversial statement. It was in vain that Muslim women protested that “*le foulard n’est pas un signe*” (“the headscarf is not a sign”).

So on one level, we can see that these different national answers to the same question reflect different takes on how to balance the two main goals of a secular regime. But on another level, the dilemma and its resolution remain hidden under the illusion that there is only one principle here, say, *laïcité* and its corollary of the neutrality of public institutions or spaces (“*les espaces de la République*”). It’s just a matter of applying an essential feature of our republican regime; there is no need or place for choice, or the weighing of different aims.

Perhaps the most pernicious feature of this fetishization is that it tends to hide from view the real dilemmas which we encounter in this realm, and which leap into view once we recognize the plurality of principles at stake.

6

We should be aware that this fetishization reflects a deep feature of life in modern democracies. We can see why as soon as we ponder what is involved in self-government, what is implied in the basic mode of legitimation of states that are founded on popular sovereignty. For the people to be sovereign, it needs to form an entity and have a personality.

The revolutions which ushered in regimes of popular sovereignty transferred the ruling power from a king to a “nation,” or a “people.” In the process, they invented a new kind of collective agency. These terms existed before, but the thing they now indicate, this new kind of agency, was something unprecedented, at least in the immediate context of early modern Europe. Thus the notion “people” could certainly be applied to the ensemble of subjects of the kingdom, or to the non-élite strata of society, but prior to these revolutions it hadn’t indicated an entity which could decide and act together, to which one could attribute a *will*.

But for people to act together, in other words, to deliberate in order to form a common will on which they will act, requires a high degree of common commitment, a sense of common identification. A society of this kind presupposes trust, the basic trust that members and constituent groups have to have, the confidence that they are really part of the process, that they will be listened to and their views taken into account by the others. Without this mutual commitment, this trust will be fatally eroded.

And so we have in the modern age a new kind of collective agency. It is one with which its members identify, typically as the realization/bulwark of their freedom, and/or the locus of their national/cultural expression (or most often, some combination of the two). Of course, in pre-modern societies, too, people often “identified” with the regime, with sacred kings, or hierarchical orders. They were often willing subjects. But in the democratic age we identify as free agents. That is why the notion of popular will plays a crucial role in the legitimating idea.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rousseau, who laid bare very early the logic of this idea, saw that a democratic sovereign couldn’t just be an “aggregation;” it has to be an “association,” that is, a strong collective agency, a “corps moral et collectif ” with “son unité, son *moi* commun, sa vie et sa volonté.” This last term is the key one, because what gives this body its personality is a “volonté générale.” *Contrat Social* I, 6.

This means that the modern democratic state has generally accepted common purposes, or reference points, the features whereby it can lay claim to being the bulwark of freedom and locus of expression of its citizens. Whether or not these claims are actually founded, the state must be so imagined by its citizens if it is to be legitimate.

So a question can arise for the modern state for which there is no analogue in most pre-modern forms: what/whom is this state for? whose freedom? whose expression? The question seems to make no sense applied to, say, the Austrian or Turkish Empires - unless one answered the "whom for?" question by referring to the Habsburg or Ottoman dynasties; and this would hardly give you their legitimating ideas.

This is the sense in which a modern state has what I want to call a political identity, defined as the generally accepted answer to the "what/whom for?" question. This is distinct from the identities of its members, that is the reference points, many and varied, which for each of these defines what is important in their lives. There had better be some overlap, of course, if these members are to feel strongly identified with the state; but the identities of individuals and constituent groups will generally be richer and more complex, as well as often being quite different from each other.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, a modern democratic state demands a "people" with a strong collective identity. Democracy obliges us to show much more solidarity and much more commitment to one another in our joint political project than was demanded by the hierarchical and authoritarian societies of yesteryear. In the good old days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Polish peasant in Galicia could be altogether oblivious of the Hungarian country squire, the bourgeois of Prague or the Viennese

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed this relation (Taylor 1996).

worker, without this in the slightest threatening the stability of the state. On the contrary, this condition of things only becomes untenable when ideas about popular government start to circulate. This is the moment when subgroups which will not, or cannot, be bound together, start to demand their own states. This is the era of nationalism, of the breakup of empires.

I have been discussing the political necessity of a strong common identity for modern democratic states in terms of the requirement of forming a people, a deliberative unit. But this is also evident in a number of other ways. Thinkers in the civic humanist tradition, from Aristotle through to Arendt, have noted that free societies require a higher level of commitment and participation than despotic or authoritarian ones. Citizens have to do for themselves, as it were, what otherwise the rulers do for them. But this will only happen if these citizens feel a strong bond of identification with their political community, and hence with those who share with them in this.

From another angle again, because these societies require strong commitment to do the common work, and because a situation in which some carry the burdens of participation and others just enjoy the benefits would be intolerable, free societies require a high level of mutual trust. In other words, they are extremely vulnerable to mistrust on the part of some citizens in relation to others, that the latter are not really assuming their commitments—e.g., that others are not paying their taxes, or are cheating on welfare, or as employers are benefiting from a good labour market without assuming any of the social costs. This kind of mistrust creates extreme tension, and threatens to unravel the whole skein of the mores of commitment which democratic societies need in order to operate. A continuing and constantly renewed mutual commitment is an essential basis for taking the measures needed to renew this trust.

The relationship between nation and state is often considered from a unilateral point of view, as if it were always the nation which sought to provide itself with a state. But there is also the opposite process. In order to remain viable, states sometimes seek to create a feeling of common belonging. This is an important theme in the history of Canada, for example. To form a state, in the democratic era, a society is forced to undertake the difficult and never-to-be-completed task of defining its collective identity.

## **Free societies require a higher level of commitment and participation than despotic or authoritarian ones**

Thus what I have been calling political identity is extremely important in modern democratic states. And this identity is usually defined partly in terms of certain basic principles (democracy, human rights, equality), and partly in terms of their historical, or linguistic, or religious traditions. It is understandable that features of this identity can take on a quasi-sacred status, for to alter or undermine them can seem to threaten the very basis of unity without which a democratic state cannot function.

It is in this context that certain historical institutional arrangements can appear as untouchable. They may appear as an essential part of the basic principles of the regime, but they will also come to be seen as a key component of its historic identity. This is what one sees with *laïcité* as invoked by many French “républicains.” The irony is that in the face of a modern politics of (multicultural) identity, they invoke this principle as a crucial feature of (French) identity. This is unfortunate, but very understandable. It is 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.

Thus the crucial move that we see in the modern West from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the move that takes us out of the cosmic religious conceptions of order, establishes a new “bottom-up” view of society, as existing for the protection and mutual benefit of its (equal) members. There is a strong normative view attached to this new conception, which I’ve called the “modern moral order” (Taylor 2004). It enshrines basically three principles (on one possible enumeration): 1. the rights and liberties of the members, 2. the equality among them (which has of course been variously interpreted, and has mutated towards more radical conceptions over time), and 3. the principle that rule is based on consent (which has also been defended in more and less radical forms).

These basic norms have been worked out in a host of different philosophical anthropologies, and according to very different concepts of human sociability. They very soon transcended the atomism that narrowed the vision of the early formulators, like Locke and Hobbes. But the basic norms remain and are more or less inseparable from modern liberal democracies.

The rejection of cosmic-religious embedding thus was accomplished by a new conception of “the political,” a new basic norm, which as Lefort suggests involved its own representation of political authority, but one in which the central spot remains paradoxically empty. If the notion of sovereignty is retained, no one person or group can be identified with it.

Democratic societies are organized not necessarily around a “civil religion,” as Rousseau claimed, but certainly around a strong “philosophy of civility,” enshrining the three norms, which in contemporary societies are often expressed as 1. human rights, 2. equality and non-discrimination, and 3. democracy.



But in certain cases, there can be a civil religion: a religious view incorporating and justifying the philosophy of civility. This was arguably so for the young American republic. It was adopting a form which was clearly part of God's providential plan for mankind ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that men were *created* equal..."). Or it can alternatively be part of a non- or even anti-religious ideology: as with the First French Republic one can even argue that all-englobing views of this kind seem more "natural" to many of our contemporaries. After all, the principles of our civil philosophy seem to call for deeper grounding. If it's very important that we agree on the principles, then surely things are much more stable if we also accept a common grounding. Or so it may appear, and the centuries-long tradition of political life seems to testify to this idea.

**Democratic societies are organized around a strong "philosophy of civility," enshrining the three norms, which are often expressed as human rights, equality and non-discrimination, and democracy**

For indeed the overlapping consensus between different founding views on a common philosophy of civility is something quite new in history, and relatively untried. It is consequently hazardous. And besides, we often suspect that those with different basic views can't really subscribe to these principles, not the way we do! (Because, as "we" know, "atheists can't have principles;" or as (another) "we" knows, "religions are all against liberty and/or equality.")

The problem is that a really diverse democracy can't revert to a civil religion, or anti-religion, however comforting this might be, without betraying its own principles. We are condemned to live an overlapping consensus.

We have seen how this strongly motivated move to fetishize our historical arrangements can prevent our seeing our secular regime in a more fruitful light, which foregrounds the basic goals we are seeking, and which allows us to recognize and reason about the dilemmas which we face. But this connects to the other main cause of confusion I cited above, our fixation on religion as the problem. In fact, we have moved in many Western countries from an original phase in which secularism was a hard-won achievement warding off some form of religious domination, to a phase of such widespread diversity of basic beliefs, religious and areligious, that only a clear focus on the need to balance freedom of conscience and equality of respect can allow us to take the measure of the situation. Otherwise we risk needlessly limiting the religious freedom of immigrant minorities, on the strength of our historic institutional arrangements, while sending a message to these same minorities that they by no means enjoy equal status with the long-established mainstream.

Think of the argument of the German *Länder* that forbade the headscarf for teachers. These are figures in authority, surely; but is our idea that only unmarked people can be figures in authority, and that those whose religious practices make them stand out in this context don't belong in positions of authority in this society? This is maybe the wrong message to inculcate in children in a rapidly diversifying society.

This is the place to establish the main thesis of this paper—what I have called the convergence of secularism and multiculturalism. It ought to be evident that while the main challenge which called for secularism in the past in many Western countries was that of a dominant religion, today the dominant feature of religion in advanced liberal societies is its diversity and plurality. The formerly dominant religion, generally some denomination of Christianity, has in general a weak hold on its (ex-)

members (or in the case of the United States, the denominations are so many and varied that none can pose a real threat to the freedom of others). And those religious identities which at least appear stronger belong to small minorities. So the call for a religion-focused secularism is close to non-existent. But the need to deal fairly and democratically with a historically unprecedented diversity of religions, cultures and world outlooks, including believing and atheist forms, and all possible variants in-between, is obvious and pressing.

In this context, the tendency which we see in a number of Western countries to focus on and even target new and unfamiliar religions, especially Islam, in the name of secularism appears both ill-founded and dangerous. It seems to me to be a profound mistake to address the problems of integration posed by new and culturally and religiously unfamiliar immigration through the prism of traditional type-A secularism, rather than through that of multiculturalism.

9

But what do I mean by “multiculturalism”? The word easily causes confusion. First, it can be used to describe a situation of fact, one in which there exists in a given society a great diversity of cultures. But the term also indicates an area of policy, covering attempts to deal with this diversity, and here the confusion and cross-purposes seem to be at their most severe and damaging.

I want to use the term in its second sense, as a domain of policies. But as such it suffers from almost terminal discredit in a number of European societies. I remember reading a headline in a German newspaper “*Multikulturalismus ist gescheitert*,” where the explanation was that the politics of *laisser-aller* which recognizes difference with no concern for

integration had brought Europe to a terrible pass, and that now was the time to get tough, and make immigrants conform. In fact, in recent months, the heads of government of the three biggest European countries—Merkel, Cameron and Sarkozy—have announced the end of this pernicious “multiculturalism.” In this discourse of denunciation, Canada is often pilloried as the source of this dangerous and destructive doctrine.

In France, “*Communautarisme*” has been regularly stigmatized as the same kind of encouragement to retreat into closed cultural communities, “*le multiculturalisme*” is seen as an endorsement of philosophy of closure. (Quebeckers often just repeat the French rhetoric on this). Canadians find it hard to recognize themselves in this travesty, because multiculturalism in this country has from the beginning been concerned with integration, putting great emphasis, for instance, on teaching the national languages, English and French.<sup>5</sup>

## **The need to deal fairly and democratically with a historically unprecedented diversity of religions, cultures and world outlooks is obvious and pressing**

But the fact that the word has a different sense in Europe and in Canada is not just a harmless semantic shift. Anti-multicultural rhetoric in Europe reflects a profound misunderstanding of the dynamics of immigration into the rich, liberal democracies of the West. The underlying assumption seems to be that too much positive recognition of cultural differences will encourage a retreat into ghettos, and a refusal to accept the political ethic of liberal democracy itself. As though this rush to closure were the first choice of immigrants themselves, from which they have to be dissuaded

<sup>5</sup> See Will Kymlicka.

through “tough love.” Up to a point, we can understand why politicians with no great experience of the dynamics of immigrant societies fall into this error, because the tendency among immigrants is always at first to cluster with people of similar origins and background. How else can they find the networks they need to survive and move ahead in the new environment? We also see this clustering in globalized cities, like Bombay, where new arrivals seek out people from the same state or village.

But the major motivation of immigrants into rich democracies is to find new opportunities of work, education, or self-expression, for themselves and especially for their children. If they manage to secure these, they—and even more their children—are happy to integrate into the society. It is only if this hope is frustrated, if the path to more rewarding work and education is blocked, that a sense of alienation and hostility to the receiving society can grow, and may even generate a rejection of the mainstream and its ethic.

Consequently, the European attack on “multiculturalism” often seems to us a classic case of false consciousness, blaming certain phenomena of ghettoization and alienation of immigrants on a foreign ideology, instead of recognizing the home-grown failures to promote integration and combat discrimination.

When I speak of multicultural policies, I am thinking of those of the Canadian-Quebec type (these are not all that different in spite of the different name). These are policies which aim at integration. But what makes them specifically multicultural is that they do not equate integration with assimilation. That is, what immigrants are asked to integrate into is a society which is understood to be in constant evolution, which will in consequence change and develop with the changing composition of its population which new immigration (and also rising generations of the native-born) bring with them.

It is understandable that populations mainly consisting of long-established ethnic groups can react with a certain unease in the face of immigrants of unfamiliar cultures, customs or religions. Will these people change us? How much? Will this change touch our most cherished values? But to rationalize this fear in terms of a threat posed by an alien religion is both a mistake of fact and an error in policy.

It's a mistake of fact, because it attributes to most, or at least sizeable numbers of immigrants the intention to overturn the basic values of Liberal democracy, whereas in fact these values, along with the prosperity they have helped make possible, are what attracted them in the first place. Immigrants mostly want to integrate, to find good jobs, education for their children leading to even better jobs in the next generation. They also appreciate the freedoms they enjoy in their new society which are often less available in their countries of origin.

### **If the path to more rewarding work and education is blocked, a sense of alienation and hostility to the receiving society can grow**

But even for that minority which is hostile to Liberal values, this fear misinterprets the source of this hostility. It is seen to reside in a religion which is homogenized and essentialized, and which is supposed to animate all those who believe in it. Such is, for instance, the picture of "Islam" which one hears in the Islamophobic discourse of the European Right. Very little account is taken of what people who call themselves Muslims actually believe. There is no allowance that Islam is a religion grouping many cultures, that the line between religion and culture is fuzzy and different from case to case; that many people may be "Muslims" in a sense which has little to do with piety and religious obligation; that many of the customs which repel us in certain Muslim societies, like female circumcision or honour killings, have

no sanction in the religious tradition. Above all no allowance is made for the fact that this tradition is very various and contested.

But this global fear of “Islam” is not only mistaken in fact, it is supremely damaging as policy. Granted that we want to avoid and even outlaw certain practices, such as the two I have just mentioned; that we want to inculcate certain values, such as those of male-female equality, it would seem to be much wiser to make allies of all those who can be brought to agree, rather than alienating whole communities by stigmatizing them as the source of a hideous cultural-moral danger. To talk in a register of the high threat of “Islam” and a threatened “Islamization” is not only to invent non-existent dangers, but also to drive a rift between religions and cultures, which cannot but be damaging to a modern democracy.

And when one adds to this that a principal source of hostility to our liberal societies among immigrants comes from their experience of failed integration, the folly of harping on the bogeyman of religion, rather than acting to facilitate integration, and by that stigmatization to make integration still more difficult, becomes more and more evident.

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Looking at the problems and issues of diversity through the lens of Secularism A, with its negative focus on religion, turns out to be an error of major proportions. To the extent that we want to grasp these problems in terms of secularism, it should rather be secularism B, that which is diversity-oriented. But to be truly diversity-oriented is to focus on the issues of multiculturalism. And in that sense, we can say that secularism in our Western societies needs to take a multicultural turn, which is to say that the two need to converge. That is the thesis which I have been defending here.

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**>> We are seeing an evolution in our concept of secularism. In former times, secularist regimes were about controlling religion; now they are more and more concerned with managing diversity in a fair and democratic manner.**

**>> This change reflects the transformation of our populations in Western democracies. International migration has resulted in a much greater religious and cultural diversity. Where formerly, say, there were Catholics, Protestants and Jews, now we find also Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and many others. Naturally the new secularism, mainly concerned with diversity, becomes involved in issues of multiculturalism.**

**CHARLES TAYLOR**

*Northwestern University, Chicago*