

The Meaning of Secularism¹

Charles Taylor

1

It is generally agreed that modern democracies have to be “secular.” There is perhaps a problem, a certain ethnocentricity, involved in this term. But even in the Western context the term is not limpid and may in fact be misleading. What in fact does it mean? There are at least two models of what constitutes a secular regime. Both involve some kind of separation of church and state. The state can’t be officially linked to some religious confession, except in a vestigial and largely symbolic sense, as in England or Scandinavia. But secularism requires more than this. The pluralism of society requires that there be some kind of neutrality, or “principled distance,” to use Rajeev Bhargava’s term.²

If we examine it further, secularism involves in fact a complex requirement. There is more than one good sought here. We can single out three, which we can classify in the categories of the French Revolution trinity: liberty, equality, fraternity. First, 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 U.S. First Amendment. Second, there must be equality between people of different faiths or basic beliefs; no religious outlook or (religious or areligious) *Weltanschauung* can enjoy a privileged status, let alone be adopted as the official view of the state. Third, all spiritual families must be heard, 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. Moreover, 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

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A “Marianne” bust, the symbol of the French Republic, is displayed in the town hall council room in Nice, November 18, 2009. The bust of Marianne represents former French actress Brigitte Bardot and the slogan reads “French Republic, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.”

I am still attached to the neatness of the above schema, with only the three traditional goods.)

Sometimes the claim seems to be made, on behalf of one or another definition of secularism, that it can resolve the question of how to realize these goals in the domain of timeless principles, and that no further input or negotiation is required to define them for our society now. The basis for these principles can be found in reason alone, or in some outlook which is itself free from religion, purely *laïque*. Jacobins are on this wavelength, as was the early John Rawls.

The problem with this is that there is no such set of timeless principles that can be determined, at least in the detail they must be for a given political system, by pure reason alone, and situations differ very much and require different kinds of concrete realization of agreed general principles, so that some degree of working out is necessary in each situation. It follows that dictating the principles from some supposedly higher authority above the fray violates the good of fraternity, that is, the idea that all spiritual families must be heard. It deprives certain spiritual families of a voice in this working out. And, therefore, this leaves us very often with difficult conflicts and dilemmas between our basic goals.

The issues concerning secularism have evolved in different Western societies in recent decades because the faiths represented in those societies have changed. We need to alter the way in which we proceed when the range of religions or basic philosophies

expands: for example, the arrival of substantive communities of Muslims in contemporary Europe and the U.S. and the recent legislation in France against wearing the *hijab* in schools. Normally, this kind of thing needs to be negotiated. Of course, sometimes this is not possible; certain basic laws have to be observed. But the general principle is that religious groups must be seen as much as interlocutors and as little as menace as the situation allows.

These groups also evolve if they're in a process of redefinition of this kind in a democratic, liberal context. José Casanova has pointed out how American Catholicism was originally targeted in the nineteenth century as inassimilable to democratic mores, in ways very analogous to the suspicions that nag people over Islam today. The subsequent history has shown how American Catholicism evolved, and in the process changed world Catholicism in significant ways. There is no reason written into the essence of things why a similar evolution cannot take place in Muslim communities.³ If this doesn't happen, it will in all likelihood be because of prejudice and bad management.

One of our basic difficulties in dealing with these problems is that we have the wrong model, which has a continuing hold on our minds. We think that secularism (or *laïcité*) has to do with the relation of the state and religion, whereas in fact it has to do with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity. If we look at the three goals above, they have in common that they are concerned with protecting people in their belonging and/or practice of whatever outlook they choose or find themselves in; treating people equally whatever their option; and giving them all a hearing. There is no reason to single out religious (as against nonreligious), "secular" (in another widely used sense), or atheist viewpoints. Indeed, the point of state neutrality is precisely to avoid favoring or disfavoring not just religious positions, but any basic position, religious or nonreligious. We can't favor Christianity over Islam, but also we can't favor religion over against nonbelief in religion, or vice versa.

The late-Rawlsian formulation for a secular state 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 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 necessity to treat beings who can experience joy and suffering in such a way as to maximize the first and minimize the second; and 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.

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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 U.S. and France. In the U.S. 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 was to be neutral were all religious. Hence the First Amendment: Congress shall pass no law establishing religion or impeding the free exercise thereof.

The word “secularism” didn’t appear in the early decades of American public life, but this was the sign 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 that 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.”⁴

This primacy of Christianity was upheld even later in the nineteenth century. As late as 1890, 37 of the 42 existing states recognized the authority of God in the preambles or texts 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.”⁵ In the latter part of the century, resistance began to build to this conception, but a National Reform Association (NRA) 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 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.⁶

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 nonreligion. The latter 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 “secu-

lar” first appeared on the American scene as a key term, and very often in its polemical sense of non- or antireligious.⁷

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 Charles Renouvier laid the grounds for the outlook of the Third Republic radicals in their battle against the church. The state has to be “*moral et enseignant*” [moral and instructive]. It has “*charge d’âmes aussi bien que toute Église ou communauté, mais à titre plus universel*” [responsibility for souls as well as the whole church and community, but with a more universal scope]. Morality is the key criterion. In order not to be under the church, the state must have “*une morale indépendante de toute religion*” [a morality independent of all religion] and enjoy a “*suprématie morale*” [moral supremacy] 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*” [rational theology] like that of Kant.⁸ 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 lopsided 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 in which we are now living 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. The goals of liberty, equality, and fraternity require that we treat all of these even-handedly.

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3

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*” [the spaces of the Republic] as in the recent French debate). The second follows 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.



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Muslim women wearing Islamic headscarves demonstrate in the streets of Marseille to protest against a looming ban on headscarves in French state schools, January 17, 2004. The French government planned to submit to parliament a draft law banning religious symbols such as Islamic headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, and large Christian crosses from state schools. The banner reads “Equality, Fraternity.”

Hence one often hears these mantras employed as argument-stoppers, the ultimate decisive response which annuls all objections. In the U.S., 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 U.S. 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 am adopting here, to a fetishization of the favored institutional arrangements, whereas one should start from the goals and derive the concrete arrangements from these. 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. These 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*” [an ostentatious religious sign] according to the notorious Loi Stasi of 2004. In certain German states, pupils can wear it, but not teachers. In the UK 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 equality between all basic beliefs. The other was ensuring the maximum possible religious liberty, or in its most general form, liberty of conscience. The goal of equality 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 argument was frequently used, however dubious it might appear in the light of the sociological research carried out among the pupils themselves, but the Stasi Commission largely ignored it.

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The other main argument was that wearing 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*” [ostentatious sign]. 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”].

On one level, 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, that it’s just a matter of applying an essential feature of our republican regime, and that 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 that we encounter in this realm, and that leap into view once we recognize the plurality of principles at stake.

4

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, they need to form an entity and have a personality.

The revolutions that ushered in regimes of popular sovereignty transferred the ruling power from a king onto 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 indicated, this new kind of agency, was something unprecedented, at least in the immediate con-

text of early modern Europe. Thus the notion “people” could certainly be applied to the ensemble of subjects of the kingdom, or to the nonelite strata of society, but prior to the turnover, it hadn’t indicated an entity that could decide and act together, to whom 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 account of 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 premodern societies, too, people often “identified” with the regime, 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.

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.

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So questions can arise for the modern state for which there are no analogues in most premodern forms: what/whom is this state for? whose freedom? whose expression? These questions seem 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, from the reference points, many and varied, that define for each of them what is important in their lives. There 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, and often quite different from each other.⁹

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 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 that will not, or cannot, be bound together, start to demand their own states. This is the era of nationalism, of the break up 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 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—for example, that others are not paying their taxes, or are cheating on welfare, or are benefitting as employers from a good labor 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 that democratic societies need to operate. A continuing and constantly renewed mutual commitment is an essential basis for taking the measures needed to renew this trust.

The relation between nation and state is often considered from a unilateral point of view, as if it were always the nation that 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.

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

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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.

5

We should see this in the context of the modern understanding of political society. The crucial move that we see in the modern West from the seventeenth 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 have called the “modern moral order.”¹⁰ It enshrines basically three principles: 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. It very soon transcended the atomism that narrowed the vision of its 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 Claude Lefort suggests, involved its own representation of political authority, but one in which the central spot remained 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 Jean-Jacques 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 nondiscrimination, 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 that was clearly part of God’s providential plan for mankind (“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”). Or it can alternatively be part of a non- or even antireligious 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 for this idea.

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 antireligion, however comforting this might be, without betraying its own principles. We are condemned to live in an overlapping consensus.

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We have seen how this strongly motivated move to fetishize our historical arrangements can prevent us from 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 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.

This whole matter deserves much further consideration, more than I can give it here, but I am convinced that this further examination would lend even more credibility to the revisionary ideal I am proposing here, which amounts to this: what deserve to be called "secularist" regimes in contemporary democracy have to be conceived not primarily as bulwarks against religion but as good faith attempts to secure the three (or four) basic goals I outlined above. And this means that they attempt to shape their institutional arrangements, not to remain true to hallowed tradition, but to maximize the basic goals of liberty and equality between basic beliefs.

Endnotes

- ¹ This essay is adapted from Charles Taylor, "The Polysemy of the Secular," *Social Research* 76.4 (Winter 2009): 1,143–1,166; and Charles Taylor, "Foreword. What is Secularism?," *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) xi–xxii.
- ² Rajeev Bhargava, "What is Secularism for?," *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 486–520 (see especially 493–4 and 520 for "principled distance"); and Rajeev Bhargava, "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism," *The Future of Secularism*, ed. T. N. Srinivasan (Delhi: Oxford University Press 2007) 20–58, especially 39–41.
- ³ See, for example, José Casanova, "Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism: A European Union-United States Comparison," *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 139–63.
- ⁴ Andrew Koppelman, "Rawls and Habermas," private communication.
- ⁵ *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457 at 471 (1892).
- ⁶ See Article II at <<http://candst.tripod.com/nra.htm>>.
- ⁷ Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). See also Tisa J. Wenger, "The God-in-the-Constitution Controversy: American Secularisms in Historical Perspective," *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- ⁸ Marcel Gauchet, *La Religion dans la Démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard 1998) 47–50.
- ⁹ I have discussed this relation in "Les Sources de l'Identité Moderne," *Les Frontières de l'Identité: Modernité et Postmodernisme au Québec*, ed. Mikhaël Elbaz, Andrée Fortin, and Guy Laforest (Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1996) 347–64.
- ¹⁰ See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke, 2004).