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Habermas, Taylor, and Connolly on Secularism, Pluralism, and the Post-Secular Public Sphere

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Abstract: The main purpose of this paper is to explore and understand the relationships between secularism, pluralism, and the post-secular public sphere in the thought of Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and William Connolly. The three authors develop a thorough critique of secularism which implies a radical break with the dogmatic idea of removing religion from the public sphere. My main objective is to show that this critique is related to a normative understanding of our post-secular situation and requires a rethinking of the boundaries of the public sphere in relation to the predicament of pluralism. Arguing against the post-metaphysical conception of secularism, Taylor develops a critique of Habermas’s “institutional translation proviso”, and Connolly stresses the agonistic dimension of the post-secular public sphere. I take these criticisms into account, while arguing that Taylor and Connolly are unable to provide a sound basis for the legitimacy of our institutional settings. In contrast to Taylor and Connolly, I propose a reading of Habermas’s theory based on the internal relationship between universal justification and the everyday contexts of pre-political solidarity. I conclude with a focus on the need to take into account the agonistic dimension of the post-secular public sphere.

Keywords: post-secular society; secularism; public sphere; pluralism; legitimation; ethics of citizenship; Jürgen Habermas; Charles Taylor; William Connolly

1. Introduction

In his “Notes on a Post-Secular Society”, Habermas defined contemporary Western societies as post-secular and developed the argument that religion can no longer be marginalized in the analysis of contemporary secular societies (Habermas 2008b). Habermas understands post-secular society as a society that “adapts to the fact that religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization” (Habermas 2003, p. 104). The concept of the post-secular is conceptually related to a variety of subjects and issues of discussion in humanities and the social sciences (Beckford 2012; Gorski et al. 2012). Through this reflection, a growing attention toward the impact and the role of religion in our modern pluralist societies is expressed. One of the most significant current discussions concerns the relationship between religion and the public sphere (Boettcher and Harmon 2009; Ferrara 2009). In fact, the concept of a post-secular society may be regarded as an attempt to rethink the boundaries of the public sphere through its relation to the ongoing presence of religion and the recognition of its social and cultural value by putting into question the mainstream secularization thesis which takes the decline of religion and its retreat to the private sphere as the necessary and inevitable outcome of modernization (Casanova 1994). This implies a critique of secularism. By secularism, I understand a political principle that entails some kind of separation between political and religious

authority.¹ Secularism is conceptually related to state neutrality and may involve a legal–constitutional separation of church and state (Casanova 2009, p. 1051; Stepan 2011, pp. 114–15). While one of its main purposes is to create a common space for the protection of rights and the actual exercise of the positive freedom of citizens (Casanova 2011, p. 66; Habermas 2004, pp. 6–7; Habermas and Taylor, 2001, pp. 127–28), secularism transforms itself into a worldview and slips easily into ideology when it attempts to determine what religion truly is and confounds state neutrality with the exclusion of religion from the public sphere (Asad 2003, pp. 15, 21, 191–93; Casanova 2009, p. 1058; Eder 2007). From this point of view, post-secularism does not refer to the reversal of the secular character of the state as such, but to the need to reflect on the ideological derivations of secularism by putting into question the idea that religion is a threat to democratic politics.

As Klaus Eder puts it:

During secularization, religion did not disappear *tout court*. It simply disappeared from the public sphere. In other words, the voice of religion was no longer audible, having become a private matter. Today religion is returning to the public sphere. I define this return of religion in the public sphere as “post-secularism”. (Bosetti and Eder 2006)

Taking this observation as my starting point, I follow Habermas’s suggestion that, as religious traditions preserve in post-secular societies their influence both for individual existence and for society as a whole, they remain ineluctably and closely interwoven with the legitimation of the democratic polity (Habermas 2008b, pp. 19, 27–28). The goal of this analysis should not be seen as going against secularism, but rather as an attempt of critically interrogating the immodest secularist attitude which perpetuates the “ideal” of blocking religious arguments from entering into the public sphere. “The political interest with the post-secular opens the way for the construal of the concept not as an overcoming of the secular, but more so as its reform, an improvement based on a critical rethinking of the normative exclusion of religion from the public sphere” (Parmaksiz 2016, p. 4).

The presence of religion in post-secular societies leads to the need to reflect anew on the role and place of religion in the public sphere (Habermas 2008b; Köhrsen 2012). In what follows, I develop such a reflection by turning to the work of Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and William Connolly. My paper consists of two main sections. Firstly, I attempt to demonstrate how the meaning of post-secular society is related to the critique of secularism. All three authors agree in rather different ways that the dominant conception of state neutrality is in need of philosophical correction, since the experience of pluralization in modern democratic societies fundamentally alters the principles of political secularism. Then, I proceed by giving special attention to the conceptual relationship between pluralism and the public sphere in post-secular society. In contrast to the universalist position defended by Habermas, Taylor and Connolly defend an inclusivist account of the post-secular public sphere without presupposing a universal foundation. Reconstructing the dialogue between Habermas and Taylor, I consider various problematic aspects of Habermas’s “institutional translation proviso” by taking into account Taylor’s objections. Turning to Connolly, I try to show that the argument of deep pluralism is of particular importance, since it locates the critique of secularism on everyday social interactions by stressing the agonistic dimension of the post-secular public sphere. My analysis leads to a critical defense of Habermas’s thought by pointing to the internal relationship between universal justification and the social contexts of pre-political values and sources of solidarity.

¹ From a historical point of view, secularism comes in multiple variants and is embodied in different institutional settings (Stepan 2011). However, my interest in this paper lies in examining secularism as a general statecraft principle that involves a separation between the secular state and religion (Casanova 2011).

2. The Critique of Secularism

2.1. Habermas on Post-Secular Society

A prominent feature of Habermas's recent work has been a thorough reflection related to modernity, secularization, and religion. Modern societies are marked by irreversible processes of social differentiation and the dissolution of traditional ties. The pluralism of values and worldviews undermines the authority of traditional metaphysical and religious worldviews and renders a unified image of the cosmos unthinkable (Habermas 1992a). The social and political conditions in modern secular societies are characterized by what Rawls calls "the fact of reasonable pluralism" (Rawls 2005, pp. 3–4, 36–37) and Habermas the "pluralization of diverging universes of discourse . . ." (Habermas 1998, pp. 403–4), by the coexistence of incompatible and even competing or mutually antagonistic comprehensive doctrines, ultimate values, and worldviews. Religious pluralism is a structural trait of the modern secular world and affects our perception of the democratic polity.

Habermas argues that state neutrality does not represent a contingent feature of the modern constitutional state but is meant to reveal the internal connection between freedom and pluralism as a fundamental and ineradicable condition of the democratic polity (Habermas 2008a, pp. 254, 257). However, the secular character of the state is frequently misconstrued as necessarily presupposing the elimination of religion from the public sphere. Following closely the sociologist of religion José Casanova, Habermas develops in "Notes on Post-Secular Society" a critical account of secularism which recognizes and maintains the fundamental tenets of secularization—state neutrality or the causal connection between social differentiation and the loss of function of religion—while rendering them compatible with the continuing "public influence and relevance" of religion in our complex and highly secularized pluralist societies (Habermas 2008b, pp. 19–20).

This theoretical stance challenges the claim that secularism is characterized by the elimination of religious arguments from democratic politics (Habermas 2017, p. 75; Habermas 2008b, p. 28; Habermas 2003, pp. 108–9). In opposition to this view, Habermas maintains that this particular attitude toward religion must be overcome and argues "that the problem of the political impact of the role of religion in civil society has not been solved by the secularization of political authority per se. The secularization of the state is not the same as the secularization of society" (Habermas 2011, p. 23). From this point of view, I take the concept of post-secular society as an important corrective to the mainstream secularization thesis which understands secularism as co-extensive with the complete disappearance of religion from the public sphere (Habermas 2008b, p. 20). Post-secular society is confronted with the "unexhausted force of religious traditions" (Habermas 2010, p. 18) and calls for a political attitude going beyond the secularist "polemical stance toward religious doctrines that maintain a public influence despite the fact that their claims cannot be scientifically justified" (Habermas 2008b, p. 27).

Thus, Habermas takes the vitality of religion and its continuing presence in the public sphere seriously and sets out to elaborate a complex political framework for the assessment of both secular and religious arguments:

The public awareness of a post-secular society . . . reflects a normative insight that has consequences for the political dealings of unbelieving citizens with believing citizens. In the post-secular society, there is an increasing consensus that certain phases of the "modernization of the public consciousness" involve the assimilation and the reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities. If both sides agree to understand the secularization of society as a complementary learning process, then they will also have cognitive reasons to take seriously each other's contributions to controversial subjects in the public sphere. (Habermas 2006b, pp. 46–47)

One of the advantages of Habermas's discussion of post-secular society is the way in which secularization is considered in terms of its particular institutional arrangements, as well in terms of a cooperative learning process where the self-reflexive stance of religious traditions within the conditions

of secular modernity and the openness of secular society to the cognitive and moral potential of religion are implicated with each other and mutually reinforced. Secularization is a cooperative venture, which is intended to unfold within the public sphere through the reasoned exchange of arguments between secular and religious citizens (Habermas 2006a, p. 4).

This understanding of secularization has some serious normative implications for the political self-understanding of the citizens themselves² Habermas outlines a post-secular ethics of citizenship which does not confront religious traditions as irrational or devoid of any truth but reflexively recognizes them as important and ineradicable sources of moral and cultural knowledge which are potentially relevant for society as a whole (Habermas 2006a, p. 10). However, Habermas maintains that state neutrality requires a post-metaphysical justification based on reasons that all citizens could reasonably accept. Reflecting on these conditions, Habermas proceeds by establishing a distinction between the informal deliberations of citizens in civil society and the deliberations taking place in the formal public sphere of the state—parliamentary and court deliberations, the government level, administrative decisions—leading to collectively binding decisions (Habermas 2008b, p. 28). Since the principle of state neutrality requires a universal justification, only reasons that are formulated in a language accessible to all should count beyond the threshold of the informal public sphere (Habermas 2006a, pp. 9–10).

In order to conform to the post-metaphysical conception of the state, religious citizens “must develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons enjoy in the political arena” (Habermas 2006a, p. 14) and accept that the potential rational content of religious arguments should be expressed and evaluated in terms of a “generally accessible language” (Habermas 2011, pp. 25–26). This language can be provided by means of an “institutional translation proviso”, through a procedural process of translation, making the reformulation of religious arguments to arguments assessing themselves in a secular language accessible to all possible (Habermas 2006a, p. 9). The process of translation is not a legal obligation but a cooperative political task performed by both secular and non-secular citizens through the self-reflexive and cooperative endeavor of mutual interpretation and recognition of some fundamental political principles that regulate our political coexistence in post-secular societies (Habermas 2017, pp. 102–3, 146).

2.2. Taylor and the Model of Diversity

Similarly to Habermas, Charles Taylor paid special attention to religion in his recent work (Taylor 2007; 2011; 2014) by trying to integrate into his thinking the particular social and political implications that secularism has for our modern pluralist societies. Like Habermas, Taylor argues that pluralism is not a contingent condition of modern post-secular societies but, rather, it constitutes an essential trait of our social and political self-understanding (Taylor 2007, p. 304). He further maintains that the inevitable retreat of a certain form of religion as collectively binding and enjoying universal political authority does not necessarily result in the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, and understands our post-secular condition as “a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged” (Taylor 2007, p. 534). Mainstream secularization theory describes modernization as involving the increasing decline or even the disappearance of religious belief as the necessary outcome of social differentiation. According to Taylor, this conception of religion in our post-secular societies is a radically simplified one, which does

² In his criticism of Rawls in “Religion in the public sphere”, Habermas makes it clear that he intends to unburden religious citizens from the undue requirement to split their identity in order to construe a secular language for the legitimation of the public sphere. He accepts Wolterstorff’s argument that religious citizens see their identity as deep and involved in everyday interactions and, hence, they are unable not to relate it to their political arguments in the public sphere (Habermas 2006a, pp. 8–9).

not take into account the transformations of religion and the different historical and social contexts in which it is embedded.³

However, in contrast to Habermas, Taylor suggests an alternative understanding of our social and political situation and attempts to rethink the conditions of secularism by shifting the focus from the generic distinction between religious and secular experience to the plurality of moral and cultural sources itself (Taylor 2010, p. 8). The importance of this conceptual shift is the contrast it marks with the traditional conception of secularism based on the distinction between (secular) public reason and (privatized) religious faith. In his essay “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism” (Taylor 2011), Taylor takes into account the turbulent history of secularism and argues that our institutional arrangements are still informed by the widespread view that secularism “makes a special case of religion” (Taylor 2011, p. 37). This conception of secularism owes as much to the historical experience of the struggle against religious domination as to a particular epistemological distinction which establishes secular reason as the only reliable source of moral and political justification (Taylor 2011, pp. 49, 53).

Taylor traces the epistemological origins of this view to the Enlightenment critique of religion, which wants to construe a neutral space of pure reasoning and intersubjective validity applied universally to the moral–political domain. However, it can only do so by considering religion as less rational than mere secular reason and/or as a potential threat to the neutrality of the public sphere (Taylor 2011, p. 51).⁴ This argument is directed against Habermas and Rawls, who construct a neutral justificatory procedure for the democratic state and see this condition as politically sufficient and socially stable under the modern conditions of intensive pluralization of the world.

For Taylor, the mainstream model of secularism is focused on religion and marked by the failure to come to terms with the recent experience of pluralism in our societies. This failure is reflected in our inability to draw a firm and definitive line between the secularity of the state and religion. Taylor proposes to replace this model with the “model of diversity”, which does not focus on the relationship between state and religion but on “the correct response of the democratic state to diversity” (Taylor 2011, p. 36). Instead of taking neutrality as its core principle, an adequate description of secularism in our post-secular societies calls for a kind of critical distanciation from every comprehensive worldview as the final and uncontestable authority for the democratic polity. The need to redefine secularism points to the profound political and social transformation which took place in modern European societies and represents the long and sometimes painful transition from the eviction of religious domination to a diversified society marked by the multiplicity of various religious and secular beliefs that occupy the same political space:

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. (Taylor 2011, p. 48)

In our post-secular societies, there is no final interpretation of neutrality without any consideration for its application in the various historical and social contexts. As Taylor argues with Jocelyn

³ This corresponds to what Taylor calls in *A Secular Age* “a subtraction story”, a master narrative which describes secularization as a passive and unilateral process based solely on the gradual emancipation of autonomous and self-sufficient human reason from the oppressive and irrational tutelage of religion (Taylor 2007, pp. 22, 157, 245, 294, 572–73).

⁴ This is what Taylor calls the “myth of the Enlightenment”, which understands Enlightenment as the progressive movement from illusory religion to the autonomy of rational human reason capable of providing us with the necessary and indubitable truth (Taylor 2011, p. 52).

Maclure in their *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Maclure and Taylor 2011), secularism is not an immutable institutional arrangement beyond history but is better grasped as “a political mode of governance” (Maclure and Taylor 2011, pp. 22–23), and in terms of a duality of principles—freedom and equality—each fulfilling particular functions rather than being derived from the institutional arrangements—“separation of church and state”, “state neutrality”, and so on—or the sociological condition of religion in modernity—the “privatization of religion”.⁵

As a proponent of the multiculturalist paradigm, Taylor is trying to demarcate himself from neutralist liberal theory. He argues that defining the logic of neutrality is not a given and its meaning is not fixed once and for all since it is constantly mediated by the attempt to engage with the experience of social diversification, which affects collective identities and disrupts the sense of common belonging in modern post-secular societies. The meaning of secularism is derived from the complex political task, often politically disruptive and socially painful, of re-drawing the lines between the different aspects of freedom and equality in a highly diversified world (Taylor 2011, pp. 41–42, 56). Taylor puts emphasis on the qualitative difference between the two models of secularism by pointing out that the model of diversity is “more evenhanded” (Taylor 2014, p. 60) and depicts a more appropriate conception of contemporary post-secular societies because it gives us a much better understanding to cope with the inevitable conflicts between the core principles that characterize the development of modern democracy.

2.3. Connolly and Deep Pluralism as a Post-Secular Ideal

Like Habermas and Taylor, William Connolly understands pluralism as a fundamental and ineradicable element of the democratic polity and develops a thorough critique of secularism with a parallel concern for the processes of pluralization that permeate the political public sphere. Connolly’s overall theoretical strategy is, in many respects, similar to Taylor’s. His main concern is not the analysis of secularism as a self-sufficient concept through its juxtaposition with religion. Rather, his focus is on the structures of pluralism themselves that transform our perception of secularism as a political doctrine and worldview and necessarily reshape its relevance for contemporary post-secular societies.

Like Habermas and Taylor, Connolly argues that the “historical *modus vivendi*” of secularism was particularly successful in facilitating the emergence of a common social space of freedom. However, although Connolly recognizes the indispensability of the separation of church and state, he shares with Taylor a suspicious attitude toward what he takes as the “dominant expression” and “self-representation” of secularism as a “distinctive political perspective and social movement” (Connolly 1999, pp. 20–21). His principal target is the philosophy of Habermas and Rawls, who elevate the Kantian model of rational politics to a post-metaphysical conception of secularism. Post-metaphysical secularism is understood here as a political doctrine that develops an autonomous logic of its own by transposing a particular historical narrative to the self-regulating transcendental norm of the post-secular public sphere (Connolly 1999, p. 20).

Connolly grounds his criticism on the idea that Habermas’s approach reiterates the Kantian conception of the public sphere as a neutral social space of justificatory certainty on moral and political matters (Connolly 1999, pp. 32–33). Post-metaphysical secularism enhances the drive to social and cultural unity by painting the image of a self-sufficient public realm based on the distinction between privatized religious faith and public secular justification.⁶ Such an understanding of secularism is unable to accommodate the dynamics of pluralization in late-modern pluralistic societies, and

⁵ “In our view, secularism rests on two major principles, namely, equality of respect and freedom of conscience, and on two operative modes that make the realization of these principles possible: to wit, the separation of church and state and the neutrality of the state toward religions” (Maclure and Taylor 2011, pp. 19–20). Taylor added solidarity as a third major principle (Taylor 2011, p. 35).

⁶ “If the nobility of secularism resides in its quest to enable multiple faiths to coexist on the same public space, its shallowness resides in the hubris of its distinction between private faith and public reason” (Connolly 2005, p. 59).

endangers the inclusive dimension of the post-secular public sphere by devaluing or excluding crucial aspects of the social and cultural existence of citizens from public deliberations (Connolly 1999, p. 19).

Connolly's articulation of the post-secular public sphere is congruent with Taylor's approach insofar as they both regard their accounts of secularism as a corrective to the universalism of Habermas's position. Prevalent in Connolly's criticism of secularism in the post-metaphysical mode is the need to shift our focus of attention from the "shallow pluralism" of Neo-Kantian secularism to what he calls "deep pluralism". Drawing mostly on the philosophy of Deleuze, Connolly understands pluralism as "pluralization", an open-ended process of constant transformation of social and cultural experience (Connolly 1999, p. 9).⁷ Deep pluralism relates the post-secular public sphere with an infinite multiplicity of different secular or non-secular beliefs while recognizing that the public confrontation of different positions precludes any attempt to think of our own position as one of enjoying universal validity (Connolly 2011a, pp. 83–84).

Connolly explains:

Deep pluralism ... is an urgently needed alternative to pursue if the pressures to minoritize the world are as active and entrenched as I claim. For a failure to deepen and extend the texture of pluralism today will mean the extension of a politics of demonization, restriction, and repression of diversity ... So, negotiation of deep, multidimensional pluralism is needed ... The demanding task is to embed such an ethos of engagement in churches, families, schools, consumption practices, media dramas, education, and state priorities. (Connolly 2011b, p. 652)

The negotiation of an ethos of engagement between multiple and alternative metaphysical positions in the absence of any prior foundation is understood as the only objective and viable alternative to the traditional secularist doctrine of the distinction between public argument and private faith (Connolly 1999, p. 155). As a proponent of agonistic democracy, Connolly gives prominence to the agonistic dimension of the post-secular public sphere. Deep pluralism takes the form of an active contestation of the traditional conceptions of identity, unity, and sovereignty marked by the modern and culturally homogeneous secular nation-state and its inherent drive to unity and closeness (Connolly 2005, p. 65; Connolly 1991, pp. 201–8, 215–17).

This critique seems to run parallel with Taylor's objections against elevating state neutrality to an immutable institutional principle. "Now that religion has overtly and actively entered the political sphere, new lines concerning the 'separation' of church and state must be negotiated" (Connolly 1995, p. 130). For the politics of post-secular deep pluralism, there is no definitive and permanent dividing line between the official sphere of the state and the political public sphere (Connolly 1995, pp. 143–44). What is required is to change the norms of legitimacy through expanding this political regulative ideal to the infra-institutional structure of the state (Connolly 1999, pp. 152–53). In a manner similar to Taylor, Connolly does not describe secularism as an unfaltering institution beyond history but as an open and porous political settlement where subterranean and ambivalent pressures of pluralization make their appearance and (de)construct its meaning, transfigure its social understanding, and subsequently transform its political perception in contemporary post-secular societies.

⁷ This is what Connolly calls the "politics of becoming". Neo-Kantian secularism pays insufficient attention to the "politics of becoming", which takes into account the disruptive and creative elements of everyday politics and ignores the fragility of social and political identities implied by our daily engagement with different and equally contestable worldviews and comprehensive doctrines (Connolly 2011b, p. 650).

3. Habermas, Taylor, and Connolly on the Post-Secular Public Sphere and the Question of Legitimacy

3.1. *The Post-Secular Public Sphere and the Institutional Translation Proviso*

The analysis of the post-secular public sphere is of particular importance in terms of how the three authors understand pluralism and its relation to secularism in our post-secular societies. Habermas, Taylor, and Connolly agree that secularism emerged historically at a time when the state was confronting religion and out of the need to accommodate a specifically neutral space of freedom and political action for the peaceful coexistence of different and competing religious doctrines. However, their responses are different with regard to the appropriate understanding of secularism in post-secular societies. Against Habermas, Taylor and Connolly argue that the discontinuity between the traditional perception of secularism and the recent experience of post-secular pluralism necessarily affects our perception of secularism as one of the fundamental political principles of modern secular democracy. The modern politics of secular neutrality must ultimately be freed from any transcendental connotations in order to more fully and adequately cope with the contingent experience of pluralism and the inclusion of minorities in the democratic polity. The absence of a single moral source as a regulative ideal for our common political life leads to the rejection of secularism as a transcendental doctrine and excludes the idea of consensus as the ultimate authority in citizen deliberations within the post-secular public sphere.

Nevertheless, while Taylor and Connolly agree that the historical experience of secularism as a normative political understanding of the political public sphere centered on the accommodation of religion is now exhausted, Habermas's "institutional translation proviso" seems to betray such an intention. In his debate with Habermas, the main object of Taylor's criticism is the distinction between (secular) ethics and religion, which provides the basis for the epistemic priority of secular over religious reasons (Habermas and Taylor 2011, p. 62). For Taylor, the alleged priority of secular over religious reasons builds on the hypothesis that religion always represents a comprehensive worldview and its relevance concerns the people that already accept the dogmas in question, while secular reason reflects the universal presuppositions of natural human reason accessible to all and respects the secular conditions of impartiality (Taylor 2011, p. 53).

According to this critique, there is an irresolvable tension between treating pluralism as the indispensable moral and cultural basis of our modern post-secular societies and the attempt to establish a common, normative language by abstracting from our various moral and spiritual commitments and cultural sources. In response to this view, Taylor develops the argument that the traditional conception of secularism based on the distinction in terms of rational credibility between secular and religious discourse is utterly meaningless since it has no rational foundation, and asks Habermas "how does one distinguish between religious from secular language" (Taylor 2011, p. 58, note 13). It is worth noting that, when he critically interrogates Habermas's approach, Taylor is not denying that there may be significant differences between religious and secular/philosophical arguments. What he actually resists is the claim that the only way to evaluate arguments stemming from different cultural and existential backgrounds is the construction of a cognitively neutral standpoint based on the procedural presuppositions of discourse ethics.

Adopting a hermeneutical point of view, Taylor develops the argument that it is always possible to move between different and incommensurable discourses in order to understand each other without sharing a common point of view, rising above our insurmountable cultural differences.⁸ In his debate

⁸ What Taylor means by this is that we could still be in the position to perfectly understand discourses based on different philosophical, existential, and spiritual presuppositions to our own without being able to decipher the deeper psychological and social experiences that form the background of these discourses (Habermas and Taylor 2011, p. 63). It may be the case that some, but not all, political arguments based on religious reasons are perfectly accessible in the realm of everyday political interactions, while others are based on some kind of experience which ultimately remains not sharable.

with Habermas, Taylor denies that such an abstraction is even possible, arguing instead that we are always necessarily moving in the background of our deepest existential commitments and we are, in principle, incapable of bracketing our substantive beliefs by taking a disengaged stance toward our values in order to construe a common and allegedly neutral language accessible to all (Habermas and Taylor 2011, p. 64).

Habermas's response to Taylor relates to the sociological conditions of religious arguments in the public sphere. His reasoning is based on the premise that, since secular arguments lack embeddedness in the thick anthropological context of a particular historical community, they are, in principle, open to everyone. In contrast to secular ethical arguments, religious arguments are rooted in a particular social and psychological experience and we are only able to participate in it to the extent that we share the experience of membership to an established historical community of believers (Habermas and Taylor 2011, pp. 61–63).

In contrast to this, Taylor sees every form of discourse as embedded in a particular and ultimately non-sharable metaphysical background of fundamental anthropological convictions. Therefore, the crucial question is not why religion is excluded but why it should be treated as a special kind of discourse in the first place. Religious language is excluded not because it is specifically religious but because it is not shared (Taylor 2011, pp. 57–58, note 11). In Taylor's view, every religious or secular/philosophical argument is intrinsically linked to a particular conception of the good life which proves impossible to eradicate without violating the existential core of one's own identity. Our deeper spiritual and existential differences can never totally be abolished in favor of a common language. Seen in this way, the normative expectation of a secular translation of religious arguments runs the risk of becoming a tyrannical prescription which is illegitimately imposed on religious citizens (Taylor 2007, p. 532).

In this respect, I am in full agreement with Taylor when he says that Habermas does not sufficiently demonstrate why all secular reasons are, in principle, more generalizable than religious arguments by pointing to a language potentially accessible to all. However, if we look more closely into Habermas's work, it appears that the difference between religious and secular arguments is not as absolute as Habermas lets us think:

Salvation religions derive an immediate power to orient action from their significance for the personal salvation of the believer. But metaphysical worldviews and political ideologies also offer explanations of the world, of history, and of society in a "thick" normative language that has practical implications for the success or failure of one's life. (Habermas 2008a, p. 259)

That being said, what is most important for our discussion is that, in the aforementioned passage, metaphysical worldviews and political ideologies are both regarded by Habermas as being symmetrical with religious truths regarding their power to shape and orient life as a whole. As a consequence, even if one accepts that religious arguments are in principle conditioned by a particular historical religious tradition, it is not clear why the view that secular reasons may be oriented to a particular way of life was previously ruled out. From this point of view, it is impossible to establish a clear-cut distinction between religious and secular arguments with respect to the criterion of neutrality/universality. In this respect, Habermas's argument in *Religion in the Public Sphere* is in need of revision in order to accommodate all arguments—both secular and non-secular—in the post-secular public sphere on an equal plane without presupposing a process of translation prior to the process of open and unconditional argumentation (Cooke 2007, pp. 228–29), insofar as the internal relationship between truth and existential orientation manifests itself equally in religious convictions, metaphysical worldviews, and political ideologies.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor shows how the public sphere in modernity is not defined by the absence of religion but by the experience of a virtually infinite variety of intersecting comprehensive doctrines. The post-secular public sphere is a "fragile" and ever-changing common social space in the sense that no comprehensive view represents the ultimate authority. Every claim to universality—religious or secular—is rendered unstable by the co-presence of other perspectives and is open to contestation

from multiple perspectives (Taylor 2007, pp. 193–94, 304, 437). The main objective of this analysis is not to establish the conditions of possibility for the presence of religion in the public sphere through an epistemic distinction between different domains of discourse, but to develop an understanding of how our experience in the post-secular public sphere relates to a particular ethics of citizenship. The most appropriate response to the challenges that face our modern post-secular societies is the shared willingness, albeit groundless and for this reason largely unstable, of constantly renewing our fundamental ties of dialogue, mutual respect, and solidarity without subordinating our deliberations to the futile quest of a single universal justification (Taylor 2010).

In a manner similar to Taylor, Connolly argues that pluralism and the relativization of every claim to universality are mutually constitutive. The co-presence in the same social space of divergent and competing positions regarding ultimate values intensifies the reciprocal awareness of the element of contestability equally affecting each position and leads to the reflexive relativization of every claim to universality. For Connolly, it is the distinctive element of every comprehensive view—religious or secular—to maintain both a cognitive and a metaphysical dimension that makes our engagement with the world possible by exceeding empirical certainty or rational necessity (Connolly 2011a, p. 39). In Connolly's terms, every comprehensive view is a "faith", a unified whole which encompasses a particular worldview, as well as an ineradicable element of sensibility pertaining to how this particular view is publicly expressed and presented to others in communicative interactions (Connolly 2005, pp. 47–48).

From this point of view, Connolly's approach overlaps in many respects with Taylor's position, insofar as both positions regard the post-secular public sphere as a common social space open to the appreciation of difference without an ascertainable sacred or secular foundation based on a single and authoritative moral source beyond history and the actual social conditions. The post-secular public sphere is described by Connolly as "sliced and diffuse" (Connolly 2005, p. 123), and is defined by the unstable co-presence of multiple comprehensive doctrines expressing various secular, metaphysical, and religious orientations without presupposing the mediating synthesis of a universal condition (Connolly 1999, pp. 8, 38–39).

Connolly explicitly relates the post-secular public sphere with a particular ethics of citizenship by opposing to post-Kantian secular liberalism, "a post-secular ethic both more alert to the fragility of ethics and more open to the play of difference in cultural life" (Connolly 1999, p. 54). This criticism elucidates the role "a post-secular ethos of public engagement between diverse spiritualities" could play in modern secular democracies (Connolly 1999, p. 158). Without the cultivation of pluralist civic virtues of self-critical stance and openness to difference, modern democracy runs the risk of devolving into secular fundamentalism. Participating in our common political life means that everyone is allowed to put into question and actively contest pertinent aspects of the fundamental convictions of others regardless of their origins (Connolly 1995, p. 130). In this view, democracy is not so much an institutional arrangement as a manner to (re)create the social world following a particular ethos of coexistence, which involves the willingness to appreciate the experience of difference in social and cultural life and cultivate our relation to the disruptive and contingent movements of pluralization (Connolly 2005, pp. 123–26).

Now, I consider this assumption of Connolly's thought as an invaluable contribution to the critique of secularism, since it points to a crucial aspect of our post-secular predicament that remains largely underdeveloped in Taylor's approach. For, when Taylor makes a plea for a radical redefinition of secularism, his perspective remains confined to the mere institutional recognition of pluralism. The portrayal of secularism primarily in terms of an institutional correction appears to neglect the crucial aspect of social interactions as the principal context for the cultivation of a post-secular ethics of citizenship. The impression which emerges from this analysis is that, despite and beyond its undeniable critical intentions, it paradoxically results in reinforcing the mediating function of the state as the sole and ultimate judge of the scope and limits of secularism, and considerably weakens the multiculturalist argument (Asad 2003, pp. 2–3).

The political philosophy of agonistic respect, on the contrary, stresses more strongly the element of active political contestation of the priority of the secular in social and political life (Connolly 1995, pp. 91–92). The engagement with difference in social and political life is not passively imposed by the contingent conditions of social and cultural pluralism but relates the critique of secularism with the prospect of political action. It implies a self-transformative and creative process reflecting, as Fred Dallmayr forcefully argues, not so much the simple affirmation of pluralism but the latent possibilities inscribed in our pluralist post-secular democracies (Dallmayr 2010, p. 7). The pluralization of the world is an irreversible and global condition marked by the rapid and contingent emergence of different social and cultural perspectives and multiple minorities or social movements which cultivate the fundamental mistrust of any claim to universality, putting into question secular certainties and destabilizing the image of a unified cultural–political identity (Connolly 2011a, pp. 59–60).

Post-secular deep pluralism is understood as a political program with the double aim of promoting diversity and critically interrogating the internal socio-political structures and institutional settlements of what Connolly calls the politics of unitarianism (Connolly 2011b, p. 653). This political ideal depends on the cultivation of a particular ethics of citizenship based on the possibilities created by the active contestation of naturalized identities, hegemonic majorities, and sedimented settlements of the past. Unlike Taylor, the post-secular politics Connolly advocates is not merely a negative process oriented to the mere (institutional) assertion of a fragile *modus vivendi* (Finlayson 2010, p. 14). The laborious, albeit groundless and diffuse, intervention in the post-secular public sphere against the marginalization and exclusion of difference is not a static condition, but a productive process leading to the creation of new rights, new cultural identities or cultural goods, and new forms of social existence contesting the unitary aspirations of modern politics (Connolly 2011a, p. 80; Connolly 2005, p. 121).

This particular understanding of democracy pervades Connolly's political theory and points to the regulative ideal of active engagement with the various processes that disturb our certainties about the way we experience the contemporary world and subsequently affect and transform the perception of ourselves as political beings. This conception of democracy goes beyond the institutional administration of pluralism by registering the ethical sensitivity to suffering and its concrete implications in everyday politics (Connolly 1995, p. 99; Connolly 1999, p. 17).

As Mariano Barbato and Friedrich Kratochwil argue:

Unlike the usual attempts to cement political stability by a basic consensus, the politics of becoming is supposed to create an opening for change, particularly in those situations in which one party profits from stability while others suffer from it ... [Connolly's] objection to pure politics and his advocacy of deep pluralism are aimed at creating more inclusive consensus through the politics of becoming. He does so, however, with the full awareness that not all can be included, even though an increasing number can participate in political contestation. (Barbato and Kratochwil 2009, pp. 327, 328)

What determines the critique of secularism in the paradigm of deep pluralism is the fundamental tension between pre-existing cultural identities, moral sources, and institutional settings, and the expectation to cultivate an ethos of critical responsiveness to the creative and disruptive movements of difference both in the social fabric and within established institutional spaces (Connolly 2005, pp. 61, 65). The invaluable merit of the agonistic approach is that, in contrast to Taylor, it locates the critique of secularism within the interactional contexts of the post-secular public sphere. A post-secular society in Connollian terms is a society that follows the contingent creativity of social and cultural life, and facilitates the social and institutional registration of novel experiences and identities through the critique of universal concepts, the contestation of established identities and hidden injuries, and the pluralization of operative distinctions without presupposing a universal point of reference for our public political practices (Connolly 1995, pp. 183, 185, 190–91).

3.2. The Question of Legitimacy

However, it appears that, when it comes to the fundamental question of legitimacy, Connolly's approach is unable to account for a methodologically adequate normative integration of post-secular pluralist virtues in the contexts of social interaction. The paradigm of agonistic respect aims toward deepening the process of democratization in a pluralist and conflictual post-secular world by adopting a regulative political ideal without making an appeal to a transcendental authority (Connolly 1999, pp. 71, 92, 158). Connolly clearly denies any prior grounding or consensus for our democratic and post-secular public sphere. However, he explicitly maintains that one of the prominent tasks of the politics of deep pluralism is to "pluralize the number of *legitimate* existential faiths . . . within the ethos of sovereignty" and speaks of "the need to extend the dimensions or types of *legitimate* diversity within the state" (Connolly 2005, pp. 147 and 61, respectively; my emphasis). How should one be able to distinguish between "legitimate" and non-legitimate—say racist or disrespectful to human life or the environment—forms of social existence in the post-secular public sphere? Connolly has little to say about the concrete normative presuppositions mediating the confrontation between different and largely incompatible or competing doctrines, although he acknowledges that "the politics of becoming does not always generate positive things" (Connolly 2005, p. 121).

The most important problem with Connolly's account of the post-secular public sphere is that it does not really provide sufficient analysis for the legitimation of its practical–political implications. What is truly missing in Connolly's account of the post-secular public sphere is a discussion of the legitimacy of our institutional and political practices in the face of pluralism that in some respects appears to be independent of any normative regulation. Connolly's response to this objection is that the impossibility of a single secular or religious source of justification does not conceal an uncritical acceptance of relativism but points to a political ethos of generosity, registering the comparative contestability of each perspective (Connolly 2005, pp. 40–41). Deep pluralism allows for a plurality of comprehensive doctrines and conceptions of the good while actively resisting the image of war between ultimate values (Connolly 2011a, p. 86). However, the generous openness to novelty that Connolly's otherwise powerful argument articulates is not sufficiently concrete, from a normative point of view, to legitimate such an ethics of political coexistence for our post-secular societies. The paradigm of deep pluralism does not understand the readiness to promote and cultivate the expression of difference in social and cultural life as a communal, intersubjective practice but as the contingent result of individual initiative. The critical but respectful engagement with our fellow citizens and their differing perspectives in the post-secular public sphere follows no other criterion than that of the purely subjective willingness to appreciate the element of pluralism.

An equally problematic aspect of the politics of deep pluralism is related to the legitimation of secularism as a political doctrine and institutional settlement. According to Connolly, deep pluralism leads to a pluralization of the secular predicament and puts into question both state neutrality as an institutional settlement and the possibility of consensus in the post-secular public sphere (Connolly 1995, pp. 28, 188). Recognizing, as Connolly tells us, that "secularism is a political settlement rather than an uncontested dictate of public discourse itself" (Connolly 1999, p. 36) makes it possible to rework that settlement through the pluralization of the sacred/secular distinction (Connolly 1995, pp. 188–89).

Through his engagement with the reality of political secularism, Connolly argues for a radical reevaluation of the secular through its conversion into one perspective among others (Connolly 1999, p. 11). In a similar vein, Connolly argues in favor of a post-fundamentalist liberalism, one that is fully aware of its own partiality and reflexively accommodates its contestability among a variety of multiple and competing comprehensive doctrines (Connolly 1995, p. 125). However, there are strong reasons to doubt if Connolly's argument is really sound, since a different strand of his thought defends "a critical liberalism that both expands and thickens the range of secularism" (Connolly 1999, p. 10), leading to his statement that "secularism needs refashioning, not elimination" (Connolly 1999, p. 19). I take this to mean that deep pluralism is based on a strategy of renegotiation of our secular

institutional settlements without putting into question our fundamental political principles (Connolly 1995, pp. 193–94). Connolly intends to show that the internal dynamic of modern post-secular pluralism is affirmed through and beyond the institutional settlement of the separation of church and state without adopting an attitude of uniform hostility (Connolly 1995, p. 178). To the extent that the development of the state around a civil religion is no longer a viable option, the separation of church and state counts as an irreversible institutional arrangement for our post-secular societies (Connolly 1999, p. 19). This leads Connolly to conclude that deep pluralism “offers the best opportunity for diverse faiths to coexist without violence while supporting the civic conditions of common governance” (Connolly 2005, p. 65). In other words, Connolly cannot endorse the priority of an absolutely diffuse social and cultural experience over established identities unless he presupposes, albeit without further argument, a universally valid and stable institutional settlement.

As for Taylor, he argues that our common political ethic is sustained by the core democratic principles of freedom, equality, and solidarity “to which different faith and non-faith communities subscribe, each other for their own divergent reason” (Taylor 2007, p. 532). It is in this context that we can evaluate Taylor’s appropriation of the Rawlsian concept of “overlapping consensus”. The “overlapping consensus” reflects a particular political ethic without being amenable to a process of independent justification—Rawls—or to the mediating authority of consensus—Habermas (Taylor 2011, p. 47). In our engagement with others in the post-secular public sphere, we are always able to rework our communal ties without being able to achieve a common understanding of the “first principles” that arrange our common political framework. The overlapping consensus rests on precarious and insecure cognitive grounds, insofar as it reflects the unstable condition of the post-secular public sphere and is too “fragile” for any universal principles to be derived from it. Nevertheless, it remains, Taylor insists, the only viable solution for our post-secular societies since it makes it possible for everyone to accept the plurality of principles depicted by the diversity model without having to abstract from the deeper reasons or fundamental beliefs for adhering to our common political ethic (Taylor 2011, p. 48).

This particular conception of secularism differs substantially from Habermas’s contribution to the debate. It attempts to establish a common and stable political framework for our post-secular societies without making any appeal to a consensual synthesis of all points of view. It is not that a certain kind of state neutrality is not necessary for our post-secular societies. Taylor explicitly acknowledges that “the pluralism of society requires that there be some kind of neutrality” (Taylor 2011, p. 34). However, the point of state neutrality is not to single out religion but to refrain from explicitly favoring or disfavoring a particular worldview or fundamental position (Taylor 2011, p. 37). Where Habermas tends to equate the “neutral” or “generally accessible language” with secular language, Taylor understands by neutrality the distancing of the political authority from a single moral or cultural source regardless of its origins. Debating with Habermas and Rawls, Taylor attempts to determine the institutional range of state neutrality by excluding citizen deliberation (first Rawls) or deliberation in the legislature (Habermas). The principle of neutrality is better understood as pertaining to a neutral zone described as “the official language of the state . . . in which legislation, administrative decrees, and court judgments must be couched” (Taylor 2011, p. 50).

Considering its content, I find Taylor’s objection truly convincing. Generalizing the principle of neutrality within the parliamentary domain contradicts Habermas’s argument developed in *Between Facts and Norms*, according to which “the logic of discourse yields the principle of political pluralism both inside and outside representative bodies. Parliamentary opinion—and will—formation must remain anchored in the informal streams of communication emerging from public spheres that are open to all political parties, associations, and citizens” (Habermas 1996, p. 171). As Alessandro Ferrara reminds us in his critical reading of Habermas, there are activities and forms of communication taking place officially in Parliament that certainly do not fit Habermas’s description based on the rigid distinction between unofficial and decision-making deliberations (Ferrara 2009, pp. 86–87).

However, my impression is that what matters most in this debate is the question of legitimacy. In her insightful commentary of the debate, Ulrike Spohn rightfully argues that one must be careful

not to take Taylor's concept of neutrality "just as a paraphrase of the conventional liberal principle of public reason". Since Taylor does not allow for an independent or universal justification, neutrality is simply reduced to the requirement of abstaining from formally recognizing a particular religious or secular worldview (Spohn 2015, p. 128). I moreover agree with the argument that, in contrast to Habermas, Taylor does not understand the modern secular state as the result of a learning process leading progressively to a superior mode of justification (Spohn 2015, p. 127). Against confounding the modern experience of secularity with the overcoming of religion, Taylor argues in favor of a different narrative that understands our social and political world as made possible—at least partially—through the emergence of a viable but not necessarily superior moral and spiritual alternative based on the core values of secular humanism (Taylor 2007, pp. 21, 234, 245).⁹

It follows that privileging a particular mode of justification or a unique moral source as the ultimate authority of the democratic polity is not really possible. However, my argument is that Taylor's attempt to understand the legitimacy of the modern secular outlook as independent from a universal justification is far from being without problems. Addressing the question of legitimacy, Taylor claims that the modern democratic state is inconceivable without the sense of a strong collective identity. Modern democracy requires a high level of mutual commitment and a sense of common identification as sources of civic solidarity and political identity (Taylor 2011, p. 44). Modern political identity is, therefore, defined in terms of its normative requirements—the three basic political principles understood as "a philosophy of civility"—as well as in terms of its substantive cultural components—a particular linguistic, religious, or historical identity (Taylor 2011, pp. 43–45). The modern secular order expresses "a strong normative view" but is subject to various interpretations and is always through a particular conception of society that is articulated and justified as an operative political framework (Taylor 2011, p. 47).

Taylor, thus, stresses the need to strongly identify with the common political project that represents the modern secular state through some kind of "political theology", and he explicitly accuses Habermas of not doing so (Taylor 2011, p. 46). By doing this, Taylor clearly gives legitimacy a more substantive meaning than a mere *modus vivendi* allows for. A deeper grounding is necessary in order to give modern democratic legitimacy its full expression. I suggest that it is this tension that leads Taylor to declare somewhat unexpectedly that the modern state can never be entirely neutral since its policies always and inevitably mirror the concrete values and the actual convictions of its citizens—Christian, Muslim, or otherwise (Taylor 2011, pp. 50–51). Therefore, the ethical coloration of the state is an inevitable condition. However, Taylor does not really explain how this deeper grounding is possible now that an articulation of the three basic political principles around a common worldview—religious, anti-religious, or otherwise—is no longer possible in our highly diversified post-secular societies. Taylor is unable to accommodate these two mutually exclusive claims in the general philosophical framework of its model of diversity unless he presupposes a stable and homogeneous social background against his own philosophical convictions. There is also an additional problem to Taylor's plea for a deeper grounding. The unavoidable ethical coloration of the state may reflect not only the "actual convictions" of its citizens in a sociologically neutral way, but it may tend to conceal the attempt of a hegemonic majority to prevail politically and ideologically in order to impose its own point of view within the public sphere and the institutions of the state (Habermas 2008a, pp. 265–67; Habermas 2006a, pp. 11–12).

Dealing with the question of legitimacy, what Taylor and Connolly share is the belief that there is—or ought to be—some common basis for the democratic polity without universal foundations. This is why their accounts of legitimacy lead to some questionable conclusions. From the point of view of post-metaphysical thinking, the legitimacy of the democratic constitutional state is conceived as an

⁹ These values include the ethic of freedom and mutual benefit, the primacy of purely human motivations, and the evaluation of ordinary human action without reference to a transcendent authority (Taylor 2007, pp. 159, 245, 256, 259, 264, 369–70, 430, 447).

inclusive community of citizens and is not based on contingent reasons, but it requires a normative justification of its universal principles based on reasons that are both accessible to all *and* universally acceptable (Habermas 2017, pp. 115–16). Habermas privileges a universal justification of the modern secular state by acknowledging that the “updated version of Kantian republicanism” he defends requires “a nonreligious, post-metaphysical justification of the normative foundations of constitutional democracy” (Habermas 2008a, p. 102).

It is precisely this identification of the post-metaphysical with the non-religious which is misleading and tends to obfuscate Habermas’s view on the matter. In emphasizing the universality of its position, Habermas nonetheless makes clear that his reconstruction is guided by the effort to achieve a common understanding—shared by religious citizens, secular citizens, and citizens of different religions—of our commitments to the normative principles of the democratic constitutional state (Habermas 2010, pp. 20–21). A more generous reading of Habermas’s post-metaphysical account of secularism should be able to meet Taylor’s objection that, dealing with secularism, what matters most is not to perfectly describe a permanent and unshakeable institutional settlement based on the accommodation of religion, although it is sometimes difficult to conceive of a different way of thinking about secularism and state neutrality.¹⁰

Far from being reduced to a mere institutional arrangement, secularism is better understood as an application of the principle of “equal distance” from any strong tradition or comprehensive worldview.¹¹ At the heart of state neutrality is not the exclusion of religion but the respect of the conditions of impartiality. The reconstruction of the post-secular public sphere represents a political task which requires mediating between radical multiculturalism and dogmatic secularism in the perspective of a “post-secular balance between shared citizenship and cultural difference”, which takes freedom and equality not as opposing principles but as the complementary fundamental norms of a post-secular democratic polity open to multiple secular and non-secular voices. (Habermas 2008b, p. 27)

In our post-secular societies, secularization is not a one-way process leading from religious to secular arguments but a complementary learning process that affects both secular and religious mentalities by forcing them to reflectively access their respective limits (Habermas 2006b, p. 23). The condition of reflexivity is an indispensable condition for political justification as a public cooperative practice (Habermas 2011, pp. 26–27). The legitimating force behind secularization is the democratic self-empowerment of citizens through their practical self-understanding as free and equal members of the democratic polity (Habermas 2011, p. 21). The “autonomous justification” of the constitutional state is not a metaphysical condition beyond history and is not characterized by the disengagement from our beliefs or cultural belongings.

In his study, *Explorations in Post-Secular Metaphysics*, Josef Bengtson contrasts Habermas’s post-metaphysical secularism with the “metaphysical post-secularism” of Taylor, Connolly, and Milbank (Bengtson 2015). The key issue here is the difference between a philosophical approach that takes ontological arguments seriously and the post-metaphysical abstinence toward metaphysical questions. Bengtson’s argument is centered on the following hypothesis:

Habermas’s post-secularism entails a bracketing of that which cannot be shared (such as particular languages and cultural or religious expressions) and a desire to stay in the realm of

¹⁰ In *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, Habermas remarks that one must be careful not to hypostatize state neutrality by stressing the fact that the separation of church and state as an institutional settlement is subject to the variability of social and historical contexts (Habermas 2017, pp. 71–72).

¹¹ “The neutral state, confronted with competing claims of knowledge and faith, abstains from prejudging political decisions in favor of one side or the other. The pluralized reason of the public of citizens follows a dynamic of secularization only insofar as the latter urges equal distance to be kept, in the outcome, from any strong traditions and comprehensive worldviews” (Habermas 2003, p. 105).

what he argues can be shared: secular reason. Consequently, Habermas's post-metaphysical post-secularity tends to make questions regarding cosmology, worldview, or religion of secondary importance, and relegates them to an area of "private beliefs". (Bengtson 2015, p. 156)

According to this argument, the intention of post-metaphysical thought is to draw a line between a neutral public language and private metaphysical questions and existential issues. In the same vein, Connolly argues that post-metaphysical thinking derives from the philosophical/epistemological inability to provide definitive answers to fundamental existential issues or the ontological impossibility of any given social organization of eliminating them from social life the possibility of removing them from public discourse (Connolly 1991, p. 162).

This critique of Habermas's thought tends to present argumentation as an absolute transcending of our social and cultural practices by conflating the reconstructive aspect of Habermas's theory with the internal perspective of the participants in political deliberations, with the normative implications and consequences that the participation in real discourses implies for the subjects themselves (Brady 2004, pp. 342–43). As a theorist of modernity, Habermas believes that the internal relationship between the loss of communal ties and pluralization in modernity results to a profound transformation of the norms of our coexistence (Habermas 2001, pp. 82–83). Far from relegating existential issues to the private sphere, Habermas claims that the undermining of universally binding substantive norms, pre-political values, and ways of life leads to "post-traditional identity", which makes possible and requires the conscious and reflexive engagement with substantive norms, collective identities, and established traditions through ethical–political discourses (Habermas 1996, p. 97).

Habermas not only believes that existential questions are of particular importance for our practical self-understanding (Habermas 1992b, p. 249), but also claims that they maintain a special relation to the ethical–political self-understanding of particular communities and even of society as a whole (Habermas 1992c, p. 448). This leads Habermas to conclude that political deliberations "are supposed to allow participants to discuss value orientations and interpretations of needs and wants, including their pre-political self-understandings and worldviews, and then to change these in an insightful way" (Habermas 1996, p. 274). In his "Faith and Knowledge", Habermas relates our practical self-understanding as free and responsible persons to what he calls the "democratic common sense", which describes this self-understanding as originating from a "many-voiced public". Our democratic self-understanding is a cooperative process that does not surpass pluralism but emerges through the reflexive awareness that political legitimacy is possible only through the actual engagement with perspectives and positions that are different from our own (Habermas 2003, pp. 109–10).

By facilitating the critical evaluation of existential and metaphysical convictions, public reason manifests its full potential. Entering the public sphere does not automatically entail the bracketing of our existential resources that shape our life as a whole and inevitably permeate our political involvements. Modernity does not only result in the disintegration of tradition and the fragmentation of collective consciousness, but it also creates the conditions for a new form of civic integration based on the rational compensation of argumentation. By this, I understand the internal connection between political legitimation and the necessity to submit our arguments and truth claims, regardless of their origins, to radical scrutiny through the reasoned exchange of arguments in the public sphere.

Closely following Rawls, Habermas argues that the idea of a *modus vivendi* is insufficient if our main task is to understand secular and religious mentalities not as opposing but as two different perspectives which complement each other in a politically legitimate way by means of public reasoning (Habermas 2011, pp. 24–25). State neutrality is not to be thought of as being in contrast with particular religious traditions. Religious communities should not resign themselves to a mere *modus vivendi*, but they should try to establish a reflexive connection with the universal principles of the secular state from within their particular communities and internal sources (Habermas 2017, p. 133; Habermas 2008a, pp. 112, 262, 308).

What is most interesting for our present discussion is that this requirement is not restricted to religious traditions but extends to secular communities as well:

The cognitive demand the liberal state makes of religious communities is all the same for “strong” secular communities (such as national or ethnic minorities, immigrant or indigenous populations, descendants of slave cultures, etc.). The traditions they continue open up “world perspectives” that, like religious world views, can come into conflict with one another. Therefore, cultural groups are equally expected to adapt their internal ethos to the egalitarian standards of the community at large. Some of them may find this even tougher than do those communities who are able to resort to the highly developed conceptual resources of one or the other of the great world religion. (Habermas 2004, p. 17)

Our most fundamental commitments should not be seen as in contrast to the universal recognition of the normative foundations of the modern secular state. Although Habermas argues for the primacy of universal justification, he explicitly acknowledges—at least in his recent work—that this precedence should take place—for both religious and secular communities—in accordance with our pre-political values and sources of social solidarity (Habermas 2006b, pp. 30–31).

4. Conclusions

For Habermas, the justification of the modern secular state is a public political practice, a way of *relating* consciously and reflexively the recognition of this primacy to our shared background practices that make that practice possible without bracketing our existential commitments or fundamental beliefs in the post-secular public sphere. However, Connolly’s argument is that agonism is an important aspect of the post-secular public sphere and should be seriously taken into account. In my view, the paradigm of deep pluralism allows for the active contestation of a particular logic of secularism while keeping the structural components of our democratic institutional settlements intact.

In his influential study, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova reminds us that the presence of religion in the public sphere of modernity is essentially characterized by its agonistic character. The legitimation of the universal principles of modernity becomes intertwined with the possibility of agonistic contestation of the pathological derivations of modernity, such as the rigid distinction between the private and the public or the complete disengagement of state and economic activities from any normative consideration. The key element here is to trace the contours of an agonistic conception of the post-secular public sphere where the historically irreversible processes of social differentiation and modern rights and freedoms are reflexively recognized as the necessary conditions of normative critique (Casanova 1994, pp. 57, 65, 219).

I, thus, propose to understand the post-secular public sphere as a common and discursively organized social space open to the continuing mediation between universal justification and the process of open and legitimate contestation and productive re-organization of settled boundaries and established distinctions, such as the private/public, religious/secular, or moral/legal distinctions. According to this view, the mediation of dialogical argument with the possibility of agonistic contestation is required in order to prevent politics from degenerating into an instrumental conception of society with no regard for the moral–practical aspects of our common life (Casanova 1994, p. 217; Habermas 2008a, pp. 240–41). This requirement points to a political project open to all and, thus, illustrates the urgent necessity for a deliberative and self-reflexive accommodation of pluralism from the internal perspective of the participants in political deliberations themselves in light of the realization of their political autonomy as free and equal members of the democratic polity (Habermas 2006a, pp. 19–20).

This proposal shows that there is still much work to be done with regard to the normative presuppositions of the public sphere in our pluralist post-secular societies. Now that the social and historical conditions of our pluralist societies are largely different from the conditions at the beginning of modern secular societies, it seems more appropriate to cultivate a conception of secularism open to the agonistic dimension of the public sphere since it responds more adequately to the novelty and the

unprecedented dynamic of the social and historical experience of pluralism in post-secular societies. In this respect, the concept of post-secular society reflects not only a well-established social fact—the “social visibility” of religion—but it takes the form of a normatively rich political ideal which leads to the radical transformation of the public sphere through its openness to both secular and non-secular arguments without modifying its inherently universalist orientation.

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