

Charles Taylor and Rowan Williams in Conversation¹

The following is a transcript of the keynote event of the Centre for Research on Religion [CREOR] Graduate Student Conference 2017, held at McGill University, “Problematizing Religious Diversity in a Secular Age.” The discussants are Charles Taylor and Rowan Williams, two renowned public intellectuals who have worked extensively at the intersection between religion, politics, ethics, and culture. Dr. Taylor is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University, and co-author of the Bouchard-Taylor report (2008) on religious accommodation in Quebec. Dr. Williams is Chancellor of the University of South Wales and Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge University. From 2003-2012, he served as the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England. The discussion was moderated by Dr. Victor Muñiz-Fraticelli, Associate Professor of Law and Political Science at McGill and Associate Director of CREOR.

V.M.-F: The question of terms is important to settle before we begin to question the phenomena of religion and secularism in present day society. Very often, the term religion in the news is associated with terms like fundamentalism or extremism, but religion is not always the same thing in every place, and extremism is not always religious: it takes many forms in different kinds of societies. This association of religion in our secular condition with fundamentalism and extremism seems to obscure more than it explains. So how do we explain the term? How do we problematize the term so we can understand the place of religion in our changing society?

C.T: I think, first of all, religion can mean an incredible variety of things, all the way from the Roman Republic where religion was part of the organization of public life through the great world religions, and just a tremendous variety of ways of living these traditions that we think of. There are people out there preaching violence in the name of some ideology and

1. Transcribed and edited by Hadi Fakhoury and Shaun Retallick with the permission of the discussants.

there are people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King introducing, I think, one of the most fruitful developments in modern society: the possibility of non-violent challenge and change that can open up the possibility of getting rid of harmful systems or regimes without leaving a legacy of hatred and violence in their wake. So, there just isn't a single thing called religion.

R.W.: Just to add a further dimension to that: I think that one of the difficulties we have at the moment is, because people have a very simple linear narrative of how the secular emerges out of a religious past, and assume therefore that religion is something superseded culturally, then you have people saying that, Islamic State for example, that it's medieval, as if that were an insult! But the fact is that Islamic State would be a lot less worrying if it were more medieval, in the sense that, what we see in some forms of current extremism are the tools of modernity – technological modernity – put in the service of a particular extremist agenda. And even the very attitudes of certain sorts of religious conservatives are themselves the mark of modernity: you have to define your position, you have to state your case, you have to block out your territory against others, and you have to defend it by whatever means are available. And if necessary attack by whatever means available. Now that's not, in any sense, a description of what traditional religion amounts to. Tradition is something you inherit, inhabit; it does not necessarily need defense in that way; it is much more about the habits of thought, practice, and so forth, which you develop, than a position that you try to occupy. The very idea that you occupy a position and defend it suggests that you're in a world of competing goods, of a competitive market of ideas in which you have to define your market share. But that's modernity, late capitalist modernity, and that's the paradox. We have this deep source of confusion where people imagine that, let's call it "conservative religion" for shorthand, is pre-modern, and yet it is in fact itself a reactive formation out of the Enlightenment and afterwards, using all the technological sophistication that we see in the propaganda war – waged now.²

2. In the question period following the discussion, Williams explains: "I don't want to idealize the Middle Ages, nor do I want to say that the Middle Ages were a paradise of pluralism. Somebody ending their life under the judgment of the Spanish Inquisition would have a view on this! But we are in a different anthropological climate when we see the most significant thing about individuals as their purchasing power. And when we understand some of our most important

C.T.: If I could elaborate on that: I think that the difference between the modern state and the medieval state is that all modern states are based on mobilization around certain markers: Canadian, American, Frenchman, and we build up a very strong sense of belonging to a community under certain principles together. Without that, a modern state of any kind is inconceivable. Nothing like this existed in the Middle Ages: for example, people were subjects of the King of France via a series of lords – vassalship; it was a completely different way of understanding politics. We need today markers and mobilizers, and this is what all these powerful religious movements are doing; they are finding ways of creating unity, and fighting other states and other markers.

V.M.-F.: One of the interesting things to come out of this intervention of medieval structures into our discussion is that the medieval religious structures were quite institutional, that is, religion was understood as equivalent to, as identical to the Church. Even after schisms and disputes, the idea was, how do we reestablish the institutional structure? And identification with that institutional structure was part of one's identity. One of the things that the process of enlightenment has done is shift religion from an institutional understanding to an understanding of religion as freedom of conscience, fundamentally, which is an individual dimension, an individual expression. So, it's no wonder that disaffiliation, and especially disaffiliation from the formerly hegemonic religious traditions that were highly institutionalized, is on the rise. I was reading some Pew Forum data recently that show there's an enormous rise in non-sectarian, simply and completely independent spiritual movements. Is there a connection between disaffiliation from formerly institutional understandings of religion and the rise of these other sources of identity that mobilize around more modern, perhaps more extreme, religious organizations?

C.T.: I think the things you describe are really quite different phenomena in the world in which you have people seeking, trying to find their way spiritually, some of them taking what some would consider a religious path, some not. And these kinds of mobilization around religious markers are not only very different from one another, they're actually opposed to each

other. If you think of the way in which traditional Islam in certain societies, on the Indian subcontinent, for instance, had this tremendous variety of different movements around different Sufi saints, around different modes of understanding, different forms of prayer, and so on. The Muslim community was immensely varied, precisely because people had different kinds of understandings of how we could make some kind of spiritual headway. And what happens, as soon as you get this kind of mobilization, is that everything becomes totally uniform. People who stand out are tremendously persecuted. Sufis, different kinds of Shia movements, are tremendously subject to persecution – more than persecution: in some cases, they're being annihilated. The spirit behind this kind of mobilization is not the spirit that says: let people seek, that is, let people seek to advance in their spiritual life, whether in this or that Christian or Muslim direction. The latter is not at all the spirit behind the kind of mobilization that produces violence.

R.W.: I think I would want to push that a bit further and say that what I see is more of a bifurcation, not just that enforced uniformity or what you described as the informal spiritual network – as if the options were either utterly uniform adherence to a clearly specified, highly distinctive religious identity, or the modern self in search of various kinds of religious illumination or satisfaction which could be selected from a market variety, which could be assembled into a personal package, a portfolio of religious practice and identity which would serve the self. And it's that bifurcation that interests me; somewhere in between is that lost notion of the unselfconscious traditional identity. So that what's left is either a highly self-conscious traditionalism of modern fundamentalisms, or the marketization of religious identities and religious satisfactions. I don't think there's any simple way of getting back to the pre-modern traditional identity. That's one of the real challenges for religion in modern society. All the pressures around us in the culture we inhabit, the pressures of modernity as they are experienced, seem to push us to one or the other of those options. Either what I call the pseudo-traditional extremist or the individualist portfolio religion.

C.T.: What I think can be done, recovered – not in full, as it were, but as a way of living – what can be recovered is a sense of the great variety of richness in a given religious tradition. That's in a way what people in Islam who are fighting against this mobilization are carrying on. I have a very

good friend who is Senegalese and, as you know, in Senegal, the majority of the population belongs to one of four Sufi brotherhoods. The Saudis offered to Senegal, “Why don’t we set up madrasas,” and the Senegalese said, “No, thanks. You would destroy our spiritual life. You would teach our children to despise.” A similar thing can be said about a certain kind of Catholicism, known as *intégrisme* in French, that has totally neglected a tremendous variety of spiritualities represented very often by different orders in the Catholic Church. What we very much need in religious life today is a recovery, in a sense, of the multitrack nature of a religious tradition.

R.W.: Yes, and I think that that’s part of what I meant when I said that I’d be happier if Islamic State were more medieval, in that there’s an assumption in medieval Islam, as in medieval Christianity, that there are routine, ongoing internal disagreements and arguments to be had. Of course, as it’s been said, that’s true of Judaism to an even more marked degree. Judaism really is a continuity of argument, argument about text. But also within medieval Christianity and medieval Islam, the assumption is that the normal style of intellectual engagement with the truth of faith is not just dogmatic repetition; it’s also a highly sophisticated system of dialectical exploration, positioning, discerning, and so forth, in the context of a sufficiently stable practice that makes the disagreement not threatening nor lethal. And when you have a situation where there isn’t that holding environment of a practice, a culture, if you like, which allows you disagreement and exploration, then you have the intellectual closing-in which we see in various kinds of neo-conservative religion around the world.

V.M.-E.: I worry sometimes that unreflexive religious tradition can collapse into blind acceptance of religious authority or something like religious aestheticism, as in the phenomenon of cultural Catholics or cultural Anglicans who identify in some way with the tradition but do not make the link between their attachment to a statue or a piece of art and the authority of bishops in the Church. Of course, not all churches are structured in this way, but at least the churches represented on this stage are! Is it possible for the Church to respond to the problem of modernity where religion is being used as a mark of political legitimacy without, on the one hand, transforming itself into a quasi-state and reinforcing its hierarchical structure and its political and legal structure, and on the other, collapsing into a kind of aestheticism?

R.W.: I think you've summed up just the point I was trying to articulate a moment ago, that we seem to be faced with two quite untraditional and potentially either destructive or vacuous options; either the re-inscription of authoritarianism or a religiousness that boils down to the beautiful soul. Now, what is it that lies in-between? Because if, as we say, we can't just revive tradition as it was, which we can't, what then is there? I think what you were saying, Charles, is absolutely right, that that's where we look at the ways in which pre-modern traditions actually handled some of their disagreements. We look at what especially the spiritual writers of the tradition had to say about the trajectories of discovery and conversion that go on within practice; we look at the ways in which certain disciplines of religious living do exactly the task that you are suggesting: helping people disentangle inessentials from essentials, to detach from a sort of pious sentimentality that just fixes onto one thing. There are resources, there really are. And, I suppose, to put it rather in a nutshell, you don't have to try to recreate the sixteenth century to read St. John of the Cross with that kind of critical edge.

V.M.-F.: Another one of the misconceptions about the medieval and the traditional, which you have both brought up, is the enormous diversity within religious traditions. We usually now hear traditionalism as a reductionist term; traditionalism means reducing everything to one particular strand, very often a quite conservative strand, a narrow strand of the religious tradition, when, in fact, religious life, the most traditional religious life, is enormously diverse. Sometimes this is even enshrined textually, as in the Talmud, and sometimes institutionally, as in the multiplicity of orders and vocations within both the Anglican and Catholic churches. How do you manage that diversity, particularly within the Church? And how is it managed in the state when there is still a latent religious identity associated for the most part with one particular tradition, say Catholicism in Quebec? In sum, how do you manage diversity, both religion in the state and religion within itself, within its own institutions?

C.T.: Well, I think that there has to be some kind of understanding of what it means to coexist with people from different religious traditions, that is, what it means to live with them in a modern state. Now, our idea of the modern democratic state is that it has openness and freedom in this regard,

and there is a kind of rulebook – which we try to specify in our courts, for instance – that the state is basically neutral in matters of religion, that there is maximum freedom of conscience. The big issue is how this can be lived. And it can't be seriously lived if there is a powerful sense that other ways of living are terrible and dangerous, that we don't want to have them around us, and so on. Now, in a society like ours today, in Quebec, the principal source of that kind of very negative feeling is not exactly religious, it's *laïque*; it's a certain reading of secularism which has to marginalize religion. And so, you can have a beautiful rulebook established there and an accepted set of rights and so on, but they are completely undercut if you get proposals like the Quebec Charter of Values. I'm very glad it wasn't enacted, but many of its provisions would have been knocked down by the judiciary any way, I'm sure, because it wasn't open to others in terms of religious diversity and freedom of conscience. I would go further than that because, in a certain sense, you develop this sense of the legitimacy of the other in a society – and I think this is one of the great things about a society of seekers – where more and more people are sincerely interested in the others' convictions. Now, that kind of exchange, that kind of contact is what is needed to give, as it were, lifeblood to the theoretical, legal organ that we've developed. The opposite of that is a condition of maximum suspicion hanging over certain communities, as we find with the spread of Islamophobia today. So, although the law, the rulebook is great, it is insufficient. So, what kind of seeking involves openness, even at times solidarity? And how can you implement that in society? This is something you can't do by law. You can't say, "Everybody, appreciate each other!" But without that culture developing in society, the rulebook is powerless.

R.W.: I agree with that very strongly, because I think again and again, it seems, we're tempted in modern societies to try to solve intractable problems by law rather than culture, not understanding that it is the growth of culture that allows this to happen. But to go back to Victor's original question about the management of diversity – how do you manage diversity in the Church? Well, my own experience inclines me to say, "unsuccessfully!" In all seriousness, one of the things which seemed to me crucial in trying to handle diversity and disagreement in the Church in a way that wasn't destructive, had to do with a couple of things, like the assumption that, if the Church is what it says it is, we will always have something we need from

the other, that we have something to learn from the other. And, therefore, it's worth hanging in there for the disagreement on the off chance that you might just learn something, as they say. That's putting it at a pragmatic level. But I think there's a deeper theological question after that, and alongside that, you need ways of reaffirming what I'd call the big picture – you know, what is it, what model of reality is it that our discourse together points us to? – and try and get back into that.

But now turning to the question of diversity in society, I think there are a couple of things here which we need to keep in focus, and Charles illuminated the question of why democracy is not as easy a notion as we thought it was. I think we have to have that in mind. There's a temptation to think of democracy in a very unmanageable way; that is – God help us – “the will of the people” or something, language we're getting an awful lot of in the United Kingdom, in ways that I find worrying. The will of the people; a majority has spoken, therefore, x, y and z follow, and that's it, the argument is over. Well, I'd say that democracy, if it's not just a majoritarian tyranny, assumes ongoing argument. It assumes continuing disagreement. And the role of an efficient and just state is precisely to manage public argument justly, peacefully, and purposefully. That is, allowing the widest possible range of voices to be heard, restraining those pressures that might lead people toward violence in word or act, and looking for an outcome that will be livable in a diverse society. That's what the modern state, at least, I think, seems to do. And that, in turn, means exactly as you said, Charles, that a just state does not seek to suppress, silence, or make invisible the difference of identities that exist within it. Nobody's identity – and this is a point I've made many times in recent years – is just that of a citizen; and the best, most effective citizen is the person who is not *just* a citizen, but has other affinities, other resources of meaning and all the rest of it, on top of it. So, a state doing its business is a state prepared to allow those resources of meaning and prompts to action to come to the light. Not to silence these sources of meaning in the name of rational homogeneity, as if we are all exactly like each other. Charles and I were talking about this at dinner last night, the way in which certain aspects of the Enlightenment, and the practice and theory of the French Revolution resulted in some of the most violent anti-Semitism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, because, the assumption was, Jews needed to be liberated from the oppression and violence afflicted on them by Christians, and the simplest way of doing that was to stop them

from being Jews! You know, think about it, and it gets worse and worse. But that's the kind of homogenizing rationalism which we're always in danger of when we talk about democracy, if it is not utterly committed to thinking of the rights of minorities, the rule of law, the universal application of law, and so forth. This is really the key point at the moment when confusions about the nature of democracy are so prevalent in pretty well every western society we look at.

V.M.-E: There's that term that you finished on, which causes some tension and concern. The rule of law is usually understood in modern democracy, at least, as applying to absolutely everyone. It's one thing for the state to encourage disagreement and discussion, but when that disagreement and discussion start to take institutional form, then there's an enormous amount of resistance. Tocqueville's observation was that democracy wanted to equalize and abolish the rights of cities, churches, and universities, and so on, because there should be one law that applies to all of us. In fact, one of the points that comes out of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec is the idea that institutional diversity is a threat. At first, it's a threat because of the Church. After all, the Quiet Revolution, at least the educational aspects, began when the Jesuits wanted to establish a university. And, as a result, now we have to make everything public and eliminate religious instruction. A similar tension can be observed in western societies with regard to the judicial institutions of Islam, which are misunderstood and essentialized. So, encouragement of discussion, I think, is something that everyone could get behind. But what about when it takes institutional form? Must it take institutional form? And is that compatible with the rule of law?

R.W.: Well, that's a very complex issue on which I've burned my fingers in the past! But, I would still want to say, there is a proper universalism about the rule of law, which simply states that the guarantee of dignity and redress for every citizen is beyond question. Dignity and redress. Everyone can properly, legally claim the same levels of protection from the state. Whether they do so or not, of course, and how they do so, are going to be affected in some ways, in some circles, by their other affiliations. And the complicated thing that a state jurisdiction has to work out is how it can simultaneously affirm these legal dignities and claims, while not seeking simply to abolish community custom and those subsidiary areas where it

might be possible for other forms of resolution to be legally recognized. So, to take the example I've sometimes used in the past, if you're looking at certain kinds of ultra-Orthodox Jewish or Muslim communities where there are issues about the legal rights or claims of women in a marriage, divorce and so forth: how do you balance the fact that no community could take away from women in those communities their legal standing as citizens of the country but not simply try and abolish what's there from the top-down? And, as I said, I don't think there's a quick solution to that, but I don't think it's a complete stand-off either.

C.T.: And I think that, if we look at the discussion of *laïcité* in France and then here as a result, I think we see one of the pitfalls that we have to avoid in order to achieve what Rowan is getting at; that what we must avoid is really a definition of, if you like, the identity of our republic, what is absolutely essential to our republic, with measures that silence certain voices. Now, it's very interesting if you look at the 1904-1905 law in France: there were two tendencies throughout, and there was very much a tendency which said, we should silence religion; religion should be put in its place, or kept out of this place, that place, because it [religion] is the enemy of everything *laïque*. And there's another reading which said, on the contrary, what we must do is avoid silencing any voice, that's what *laïcité* means. And that's why both of these versions of *laïcité* were against the idea of a Catholic monarchy, because that was still silencing voices. And it's very interesting to see that, after looking at the debate in France – and you have to do that, you know, because *laïcité* is the same word and we're very influenced by it – you find that, in Quebec too, you begin to get, in favour of that more rigorous *laïcité*, identitarian arguments: “That's really what it is to be Quebecois, really what it is to be a *citoyen français*.” And there's a real struggle to examine very closely what our notion of common identity is, to make sure that it's not a way of silencing people. Which it is becoming, as we see in a large number of European countries today, such as Hungary or Kaczyński's regime in Poland, from a supposedly religious side. Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, said, these refugees are a threat to Christian civilization! From the *laïque* side, it is very easy to fall into the same scenario.

V.M.-F.: We have an additional dimension in both Europe and Quebec. It's something that you briefly mentioned in the context of the Charter of

Values, that this would never pass judicial muster. The question is from whom? Because there are federal and supranational structures here, and the question of identity – of the identification of *laïcité* with identity – may not mean the same in Quebec City as it does in Ottawa, or in Hungary as it does in the European Union as a whole. So, is there an additional complication, or is there simply additional opportunity, for diversity to emerge in a federal or cross-federal world?

C.T.: Yes, there is a possibility for very negative things to emerge. I don't think Europe has quite solved that problem yet, because I think the European courts are sometimes too deferential to national positions, as they were about the interdiction of the hijab in French schools. But, in our case in Canada, the grounds on which someone would throw out some of these restrictions for wearing the hijab are in the Quebec Charter, as well as in the federal Charter. However, the argument here is principally about what citizenship means. It can't be aligned with a set of rules which silences certain voices.

V.M.-F.: One of the interesting aspects of a lot of debates over secularism, and over the management of diversity itself, is the centrality of gender. Not only the centrality and status of the participation of women, which, say the ordination of women as priests and bishops in the Anglican Communion, becomes a central point of contention, but also the place of gay and lesbian congregants. And there is a call, which I think is also tied with this notion of a single people, or a single law, for isomorphism, whereby, as we have come to accept equality and equal dignity in society as a whole, the institutions within society also must accept them; those that do not are somehow alien. It's unclear what religious communities should do in the face of this tension between tradition and diversity, how they should respond to calls for accommodation.

R.W.: I often wish that I didn't have to fight this battle on this particular set of issues, because I end up defending the right of some communities to maintain positions that I myself don't really like. It's not very congenial. Yet, my worry is that if we don't somehow understand the risks there, we will end up saying, the state determines the arguments by which people come to their conclusions about social matters. So, taking again the highly controversial and neuralgic question of same-sex marriage in the UK, the

difficulty, I think, many people felt – many as a church felt – was not so much about the legal equality of LGBTI people as about the state’s implicit claim to be saying that this is how you have to argue to be a citizen. Now, this does not prevent a religious community to come to new conclusions out of its own resources or out of its own terms or even at its own pace. The problem is that churches often confuse their own faith-based wrestlings over these issues with state policies; secondly, they forget that they have sometimes been violently opposed to legal equality for LGBTI people, or have been reluctant to go along with equalizing legislation for women. They haven’t got very much credibility on these issues. They have tried to say, well, the state ought to be accepting our argumentation. It is, therefore, not perhaps entirely surprising if the state sometimes turns around and says – almost says – you’ve got to accept *our* argumentation. And one of the struggles that we’ve often had in the Anglican setting over the years is trying to clarify, especially with some of our brothers and sisters from Africa, that it is perfectly possible to say, there is a moral question about the legal status, legal liberties, and legal dignities of lesbian and gay people, which we as Christians ought to be unambiguous about. There should not be a disagreement about that. What we have to wrestle with is what we make morally of the relations people enter into – and that’s not a closed argument yet. What should be a closed argument is the utter rightness of legal and universal dignity, and protection; that is, the resistance to restrictive and repressive legislation, and persecution of gay people and so on. That ought not to be an issue, and there have been successive statements by Anglican bodies underlining that, but our practice has yet to live up to it. So, it’s not entirely surprising to say that we rather lack credibility there. But the worry remains, I would like to see religious bodies given the space to reflect and make up their minds in their own terms about their own business. But, the state, in moving towards certain legal positions, can sometimes give the impression of wanting to dictate how the argument should be conducted. That’s my worry.

V.M.-E: One of the religious resources internal to the Anglican community is the nurturing of diversity – of all sorts of exceptions or accommodations – for instance, with respect to the settlement of the issue of the ordination of women bishops. It was fascinating to see how the House of Clergy and the House of Bishops were very much on what we would deem the progressive

side, while a significant minority of the House of Laity resisted. The accommodation was that you could slow down the process of normalizing women's ordination within some of these parishes. They could avail themselves of other sources of authority within the Communion. Is this translatable to a modern democratic state? Are the resources of religious traditions translatable to the institutions of the state and to the claims of a modern democratic state governed by the rule of law?

C.T.: If you look at various religious communities, from the point of view of the state, they are allegiances made by individual people. Now, one thing is if in the course of practicing that they violate the law egregiously, or force people to do this or that. That obviously is the case for state intervention. But if you think that citizens have the right to form or belong to associations, even though they do things that go against our principles, unless there is a clear violation of the right of the individual, then it's part of what it is to live in a society where there is real diversity. Of course, there are cases where it is not so clear cut, but clearly a democratic state doesn't require a uniformity of internal ethos within particular associations.

V.M.-F.: I want to circle back to the traditional understanding of religion as something that one lives and doesn't decisively choose. It seems that the norm of the modern democratic state is actually pushing a particular vision of religion by regarding every single religious tradition as a mere collection of individuals who are voluntary members. This technically forces them to conceive of themselves in this very modern way, interfering with religious traditions that wish to contribute to democratic societies while retaining their traditional identity. Is that voluntarist concept of religion compatible with religious traditions themselves?

C.T.: It's not so much constructed by the state as it is constructed by modern culture. The thing is, we are living in societies that are tremendously diverse, where people are changing their positions. Many no longer go to the church their parents took them to. In that kind of world, we begin to construct ourselves as all sorts of individuals. Now, of course, there are certain ways of living a very tight communitarian life within this; for example, in Montreal, the Hassidim have a very tight community structure, and people do lead that from time to time. But that's a way of going against the current, and they're

going against that which is not simply created by modern law, but which is the dominant current in modern culture. So, it's not simply a question of law, but of culture.

R.W.: It's a secular example, but I listened to a discussion a couple of weeks ago about the younger generation in Hong Kong, those who have grown up there since the handover to China. A young journalist named Ben Bland has written a book called *Generation HK* about these young Hong Kong people who've grown up neither with the mainland China identity, nor with the Hong Kong colonial identity. And these are the people who are currently protesting most strongly against the increased influence of Beijing in Hong Kong's politics, but don't quite know themselves – and nobody can answer this for them – where they belong politically, socially and culturally. They are at sea in some ways. They haven't inherited or inhabited any of the old models of identity. This example of a non-religious environment affected by the voluntarist trend is a parable. And because it's not just a matter of the state being difficult – the state often acts as it does because culture is as it is – there is, I think, a very big job to be done to elucidate what we do mean by the density or solidity of religious community as something other than just an assembly of individual choices; and there's a major descriptive and philosophically analytic job to be done about how that relates to a society which is not simply homogeneously rationalistic. We need to have more argument in public. We need to have more discussion about what exactly is the matter with the idea of a rationalist-secularist universe which silences other voices – because that's the default setting in a lot of political discussion these days. Also, we need to push a bit to say, look, can you see why that is not necessarily the obvious meaning of democracy? And why that, in the long term, may in fact undermine some things about liberalism, the rule of law and all the rest of it?

V.M.-F.: One of the problems in translating the religious point of view – the demands of faith, the demands of religion, whether mediated by human beings, or seen as directly connected with the authority of God or the divine – is that many religious individuals do not regard their religion as a voluntary choice. Many of the conversations around controversial social issues are presented as if religion were voluntary – “well, you can keep all of your religion, but you can choose to abandon this particular segment or

this particular tenet which is offensive to dominant culture.” The religious individual’s response to that is, “I did not choose the rest, so I can’t choose not to affirm this.” I often wonder whether it’s possible to accommodate that religious understanding of authority within not only a voluntarist presumption, but also a presumption that the only source of authority ought to be our identity. Is it possible, in a secular state, to be religious with an unambiguous attachment to religious identity and authority? Is that conceptually and practically possible?

C.T.: I think there’s a deep conceptual confusion in that. I mean, when you say, “free choice,” you’re thinking in two quite different contexts. I don’t really have a free choice to suddenly become an Islamic State jihadi: everything in me rebels against that; it’s not one of my choices. On the other hand, I have a free choice to practice and preach this particular outlook in the sense that nobody can stop me. In my case, I feel I am grabbed by a conception of human right and dignity. It’s not a power I have to say, “Oh, I’m going to choose something else.” I think that this confusion, however, although it is only a conceptual confusion, goes very deep in people. A lot of people, in particular, who argue from a secular point of view talk as though it should pop up from you at any given point, entirely out of yourself, as if you could suddenly make your identity. Nobody totally makes their identity! It is formed – sometimes by rebellion – in families, communities, and so on. So, I think there’s a conceptual confusion here; but it’s a conceptual confusion that can have political consequences if people carry them in a way that does not recognize that conceptual distinction at the basis of this.

R.W.: Yes, that’s right. Sometimes it comes across as if one is saying to the religious person, “Why can’t you just change your mind?” As we all know, that’s not a terribly helpful question, because what makes the mind we have is, as you say, a whole range of belongings, affiliations, and affinities, which are not just dependent on our will. So, there is a good deal of confusion. As to whether it is possible to exercise an integral religious identity within the secular state, of course, a lot depends on what this platform has made abundantly clear: what do you mean by the word “secular”? I think we’ve already to some extent noted just how different models of secularity may be. For my part, I’ve tried in recent years to elaborate a bit of a distinction between what I call programmatic and procedural secularism. Programmatic

secularism is the silencing option; procedural secularism is the state holding the ring, facilitating debate, including religious voices, with the aim of justice and agreement. It's not always easy to see where a society may lie on that spectrum.

V.M.-F: To go back to the question, “Why can't you just change your mind?” Sometimes the argument is more sophisticated, and much more practical, along these lines of two different versions of free choice: the freedom to act or practice in a particular way vs. the freedom simply to shape oneself, which I agree is not complete and certainly problematic. Sometimes the argument is addressed to religious believers differently: in this pluralistic, democratic, liberal society, we will let you believe whatever you want to believe, but this is not a question of belief, it's a question of action; and religion is merely a question of belief. To give some controversial examples that have emerged in different countries recently, of course, you can believe whatever you want about the structure of traditional marriage – marriage ought only to be between a man and a woman – but if you happen to occupy a position, say as a clerk in Kentucky, you cannot act upon it. There's conflict there between identities, because you are voluntarily a clerk with duties there as well. One can also mention the case of the Trinity Western University Law Faculty, where there is a covenant that asks all members of the community to affirm and abstain from conduct that violates the principle that marriage is only between a man and a woman, in a society where you're being trained as lawyers and governed by those provincial and federal laws which state something different. On the other hand, there seems to be something similar on the side of the state. For example, the Ontario Law Society says, we believe certain things, but you're forcing us to be complicit with them. So, the argument of complicity seems to obscure the distinction between belief and action, which are closely tied not only in the mind of the religious believer, but in the mind of the citizen as well. How do you respond to the question: we won't change your mind, and you can believe whatever you want, but you have to act in this way, regardless of what your faith tells you is correct?

R.W.: I think the key question there is, what “you have to act” means here. You have no legal freedom to impede anyone's access to what the law provides. That seems to be a reasonable demand from the state. You can't actually

forbid or obstruct what the law, as a matter of fact, lays down. So, there's a kind of negative condition there. A much more controversial proposition is: you, as a citizen, in every imaginable circumstance, have to enact what the law makes possible. Just as in British law the exemption still remains, under the Abortion Act of 1967, for those who have conscientious scruples about performing an abortion, that they are not compelled to act against their conscience. So, this is a delicate exercise. I think there is a distinction that can be affirmed. But it is becoming increasingly difficult – as in the Kentucky case – to know exactly where the border lies. If you are holding a legal position, say you are a clerk solemnizing or registering marriages, that really is your job. You're not expected to affirm conscientiously everything you do. I think it would help if we were a bit clearer about that; the person registering a marriage of which they do not approve is simply doing a legal job about which there's a perfectly legitimate expectation they'll perform it, in terms of their professional duty. It's a grey area, and I don't see it being settled in a hurry. I was for two years Chair of a working party set up by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights in the United Kingdom on religion and the law. We went round and round these issues; we were a very mixed group, including some hardnosed secularists, as well as representatives of various religious communities. On the whole, the point we kept on coming back to was exactly the one that Charles brought up earlier, and which I very much echo: it is extremely difficult to solve certain problems by law rather than culture. Legal accommodation is only ever a partial answer. What we ought to want to get is a culture of sufficient patience and respect to allow conscience to work at its own pace in some areas, while being uncompromising about what protections and proper claims the law gives to everyone.

V.M.-F: To take up this question of it being someone's job to perform a legal transaction, and this is something that they voluntarily assume: some of them may have taken-up the job before the law came into play, but still they did so voluntarily. That was one of the points of contention for the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. What exactly counted as someone's job? I think there the line between law and culture became fudged. Because of the way that, say, a judge or police officer presents themselves to the public, there's some disagreement as to whether an appearance can be counted as someone's job. In some cases, the problem is one of general expectations as

to how someone else looks, and whether that has an exclusionary effect on some communities which would therefore not be able to participate. So, in a context like that – I remember that was a point that you, Charles, wrote about after the Commission ended – can your job sometimes be to enact a political culture?

C.T.: Yes, it can be. I think that what we have here – to underline what Rowan was saying – are these difficult dilemmas. But there are ways out of them. We see two possible ways; the one is, what we would probably recommend to the Kentucky court clerk, to say: “Look, it’s your job and you’re not doing anything really terrible by just writing it down and signing it.” Whereas in the other case, the abortion case, obviously the actual doing of this act is something that deeply offends the conscience of the person concerned. There, the solution is usually to find some kind of substitution arrangement: “Okay. You don’t have to do this; someone else will.” And even in the case of the clerk, you could imagine setting up the institution in such a way that there was a deputy on hand, as it were, that could step in. These are two ways of avoiding the dilemmas, of having your cake and eating it too. But, to go back to a point Rowan made, nobody has a right to stop someone from doing what they have a right to do; you can’t step in and say: “No, you can’t do this.” But at the same time, you have to respect the very powerful dictates of conscience to the extent that this is possible. So, there are moments where, if you didn’t use one of these get-outs here – substitution and so on – you’d be forced to say, “no” to this, or “no” to that. You would be forced to deny some citizen a right – marriage, abortion and so on – or on the other hand, to force some citizens to do something absolutely against their conscience. See, I think this is where culture enters in; a society that really respects difference would be a society that would go many miles in order to allow these two to co-exist. Now, that offends a certain sensibility. But my understanding of democracy, my sense of democratic sensibility is that that’s what you’ve got to do. Nobody must be stopped from exercising a right, but nor can you force people against powerful dictates of conscience.

The conversation was followed by a question period with the audience.