Abstract: The following article addresses the political dimension of identity in its complex interrelations with memory on one hand and normativity on the other. Identity, as Amartya Sen has shown, is neither an essence nor a function of religious belonging, as determinists and reductionists have assumed, but the result of an active process of choice. Autonomous choice, however, does not take place outside of time and space, far from external resistance and contradictions, but is rooted in situations, emotions, corporeality and all sorts of qualitative dimensions. Identity, that is, is neither passivity nor unbound freedom. It is “invention”, as Said has suggested: an unstable compromise of past, present and future that is the work of imagination. By drawing on categories from Arendt and Taylor, the interplay of memory, imagination and identity is explored from the point of view of contemporary social theory and its challenges, and the notion of “memory politics” is brought to bear on controversial issues such as the cohabitation of secular and religious worldviews in a multicultural society.

“I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased.”¹ Why does Changez, the main character in Hamid’s novel, a Pakistani who graduated in economics from Princeton and was comfortably at home in Manhattan, smile when he sees the attack on the twin towers on the television, almost without realizing or being able to control himself? Why is it that, while on a pleasant vacation, when he realizes that he is not watching a movie but the news of a terrorist act performed by his fellow countrymen, what comes into play is his belonging to Pakistan and not to the upper class of New York?

The question of identity, identity’s deep bond with memory and the need for recognition that is put forward to democratic politics, is once again very much at the center of philosophical discussion. Helping to bring this debate, which at the end of the previous century seemed to have come to a positive end, up-to-date are the events of September 11, but also, and significantly, the events following September 11 – I am thinking of the terrorist attacks in Madrid, London and Mumbai and, most recently, the attempt by Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab, a Nigerian belonging to the governing classes of his country and educated in London, to blow up the airplane taking him from Amsterdam to Detroit with more than three hundred people on board. It is these attacks, for the main part carried out by immigrants who could have had every chance to be quite well integrated into Western democracies, which highlight that the problems brought to the attention by the communitarians cannot be considered completely resolved, and indeed, need to be re-examined in light of what is happening in our intercultural world. If the identity rhetoric, today mainly divided into topics of religion, still appears able to provide, also to people brought up in the mold of Western democracies, sufficient motivation to justify first of all immediately emotional support for fundamentalism and even terrorism, as narrated by Hamid, it seems evident that the question of the relationship between identity and politics needs to be examined afresh. And, in particular, what needs to be re-examined is the problem of memory, primarily its function in constituting identity and, secondly, its relationship with normativity, a function underlined by some theories but underestimated by others.

My contribution is devoted to rethinking the problem of the relationship between memory, identity and normativity. First I will make a wholly positive link with Amartya Sen’s identity theory. I will highlight the importance of the central position the great cosmopolitan intellectual gives in his theory to the function of imagination in the identity-building processes. Sen sees the imagination as an antidote to use against theories that had instead anchored

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3. While notoriously the communitarians had imprisoned identity in the space-time of memory and had also thought of ethical normativity as the expression of cultural contexts that could not be transcended, here I am thinking in particular of MacIntyre (A. MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), since the outset the tradition of modern, enlightened and liberal natural law has clearly separated – in this Kant’s moral theory was paradigmatic – the question of the justification of normativity from memory.
identity to memory and, therefore, to a holistically closed cultural space. For Sen, imagination and fantasy have the function of freely and originally putting together the many and muddled experiences linked to different, distant and often extraneous cultural spaces, experiences that identity in itself should bring together. The thesis that I shall uphold is that to perform this important unifying function well, imagination must be bound to memory which, therefore, regulates its use. Such a form of memory-regulated imagination is given the apt definition of *inventio* by Edward Said, whose use of the term refers to classic rhetoric and Vico. The *inventio* through which identity is constituted remolds the *quality* of what the memory preserves of its many experiences and gives it a new sense beginning from the present time.

But what relationship needs to be established between memory and normativity? The *Neuzeit* stood apart thanks to its inauguration of the idea of a radically new time, a time that had to be renewed as such in every choice that wanted to be deemed as right. Late 20th-century debate doubted this feature of justice. Ethical contextualism and multiculturalism have defended the right to include requests for recognition coming from identity in the public space. Nadia Urbinati proposes that we think of a politics for the respect of cultural differences as a politics that attempts to regulate the relationship between present and memory and that we think of the rights allocating freedom of expression to all the people subject to a set of laws as the tools used by a democratic society to implement a *memory politics*. The encounter with Islam has highlighted that the *memory politics* of our democracies needs to be re-examined by first comparing a particular aspect of personal identity: religious belonging. A wide-ranging debate is underway on secularization theory. When examined from the viewpoint of the Western democracies’ *memory politics*, this debate has brought a salient issue into play. While democratic public space theory may have originally been thought out by anticipating a disenchantment no longer believed in today, and Islam rekindles in the memory the time in which “transcendency” imbued every aspect of human life and, therefore, politics, the issue that liberal and democratic thought has to deal with is rethinking the nature of public space against the “background” of the memory which has recouped the *quality* of religious experience and its meaning for political subjects and how the political subjects form the democratic space through dialogue.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) On this see the contribution by Nadia Urbinati.

1. The Spaces of Identity and Inventio

Sen’s reflection on identity was prompted by the issues raised by Huntington’s well-known theory on the clash of civilizations and was, therefore and first of all, polemically aimed against those who considered that individuals’ exclusive and all-encompassing identity was defined by religious belonging. In the reductionism of those who define an individual’s identity as passive support of a religious tradition, Sen sees two sorts of violence at work: not only is the multiple wealth that characterizes the histories of peoples excluded from the reflection; but so is the role that an individual’s rational choice plays in building their identity.

Therefore, what is significant in Sen’s identity theory is his criticism of the cultural semantics transmitted through the history of memory, a different story from the history of the peoples. This critique is the presupposition for Sen’s argument in defense of the idea that it is rational choice that forms identity. The history of memory that has gone to form the West’s cultural semantics has shifted to the sphere of Western tradition not just “mathematics and science,” but also the central idea upon which ethical universalism lies, that is, rational and free choice. If we distinguish between history of memory and history and we do not reduce the history of the peoples to what the bellicose spirits boil it down to, we also find this idea, set out and justified in a different way to Western enlightened philosophical tradition, in the basket of other peoples. Sen remembers the story of Gora in the novel by Tagore. After defending old Hindu customs and traditions, in the end Gora chooses to simply consider himself a human being who lives in India, without any distinctive characteristics in terms of religion, class, caste or skin color. For Sen the capacity to choose, upon which the identity-building processes lie, does not necessarily have to be emphatically connected to an idea of rationality purified from contextual

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7 “There is no empirical reason at all why champions of the Muslim past, or for that matter of the Arab heritage, have to concentrate specifically on religious beliefs only, and not also on science and mathematics, to which Arab and Muslim societies have contributed so much, and which can also be part of a Muslim or an Arab identity. Despite the importance of this heritage, crude classifications have tended to put science and mathematics in the basket of ‘Western science,’ leaving other people to mine their pride in religious depths. If the disaffected Arab activist today can take pride only in the purity of Islam, rather than in the many-sided richness of Arab history, the unique prioritization of religion, shared by warriors on both sides, plays a major part in incarcerating people within the enclosure of a singular identity.” (A. Sen, Identity and Violence, New York-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 15).
contamination. This is the route that had been followed by the tradition of modern natural law.9

The emphasis placed on use of the imagination rather than use of the memory and, consequently, the centrality of individual freedom in choosing which types of belonging constitute an individual’s identity, make Sen’s a liberal theory. However, I believe that this theory, while worthy of having brought into play important and extremely useful lines of argument against Huntington, as well as against antiquated theories that reduce identity to cultural belonging, and at the same time of having reasserted the reasons for a moderate contextualism, does not sufficiently take into account the temporal dimension of types of belonging that free choice brings together in an identity. I also think that this has particularly negative consequences with relation to the problems that religious belonging is posing to Western democracies. Forms of belonging do not lie in space like objects, they are not lacking emotional tones and they are not available “at will” for the all too simplistic sums and subtractions such as those described by Sen. In the language he uses Sen also seems to connect back to a radically skeptical philosophical tradition, a tradition that is anthropologically too weak, a tradition that as such cannot manage to account for how things are in order to make human beings what they are.

It was Derek Parfit, in a book that had a very wide circulation in the second half of the 20th century, who updated the skeptical and radically anti-substantialistic anthropological model.10 In the third part of Reasons and Persons Parfit defines the concept of the acting and critical person as an anti-reductionalist notion of the person, that of traditional cognitivism according to which the person is an entity apart, something that goes beyond the sum of brain, body and a series of individual experiences. For Parfit, a person’s existence corresponds to that of a series of mental events, psychological events, connected together and continuing, occurring in a brain, and, therefore, in a body. For Parfit connection means that between desires, memories, intentions and beliefs there is a direct psychological connectedness. Continuity means that groups of events connected psychologically follow each other, overlapping in a conception of time very similar to space. Therefore, for Parfit, a person is not a unitary and concrete subject, a psychophysical unit; a club or a nation appear to possess the same type of unity inherent to the person in the way that Parfit describes him. And indeed, if what is decisive in order to characterize the person is the psychological continuity of series of events connected to each other, the body and the brain within which this series of events are inserted are totally interchangeable. Parfit explains his position with an example (a men-

tual experiment) which makes it immediately evident for us. If the person is essentially a collection of mental events, he can be teletransported and placed in another body and another brain (which Parfit says is identical to the other) without anything in him changing at all.\footnote{“I enter the Teletransporter. I have been on Mars before, but only by the old method, a spaceship journey taking several weeks. This machine will send me at the speed of light. I merely have to press the green button. Like others, I am nervous. Will it work? I remind myself what I have been told to expect. When I press the button, I shall lose consciousness, and then wake up at what seems a moment later. In fact I shall have been unconscious for about an hour. The Scanner here on Earth will destroy my brain and body, while recording the exact states of all of my cells. It will then transmit this information by radio. Travelling at the speed of light, the message will take three minutes to reach the Replicator on Mars. This will then create, out of new matter, a brain and body exactly like mine. It will be in this body that I shall wake up” (See Parfit, Reasons and Persons, p. 199). For a different usage of Parfit’s identity theory from the one put forward here see: G. Mari, “Differenza e identità personale,” in M. Pinna (ed.), L’Europa delle diversità. Identità e culture alle soglie del terzo millennio, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994, pp. 131-141.} When the transportation has taken place, the narrating self in Parfit’s experiment may indeed state that upon examining (with an identical gaze to the gaze that another person would look at him from the outside) his new body he finds no differences of any kind.

This is not the place for setting out the philosophical discussion which, especially since the end of the 1980s, deeply undermined the arguments that by no means Parfit alone had used to defend this notion of identity.\footnote{On this see V. Gessa Kurotschka, “La non riducibilità della coscienza fra Philosophy of Mind e neurobiologia,” Iride, 40 (2003), pp. 467-493.} The outcome of this discussion, however, is relevant to us.\footnote{I only wish to remember that the theory of neuronal group selection was the result of empirical studies by Gerald Edelman on the immune system, that is, on how the biological memory works.} That the mind has a material basis, that this material basis is the brain and that this is located in a sensitive body that positively conditions how it works, is no longer questioned by anyone today. But it is precisely this outcome of scientific research on the brain that today makes his theory of identity somewhat antiquated. Nowadays we are well aware that it is not conceivable that two different brains in two different bodies are, as Parfit says, identical. And what makes them different is precisely individual memory which is epigenetic, historical, linked to the time that a sensitive body spends having experiences that are incorporated (memorized) in an irreducibly individual bios. If not, two people with a different body and the same psychological continuity could not feel different things. In short, the mental events that make up an identity, and which in Parfit’s theory are portrayed as elements available in space, instead also have a qualitative and temporal dimension, which the theory has to take into account, a temporal dimension which is both mental and physical.
What conclusions can be drawn from this philosophical-anthropological *excursus*? If the elements that free choice has to unify have a qualitative nature and different emotional shades, putting them together and composing them in the process through which an individual identity is made up is not an operation of the type described by Sen. The composition operation is definitely imaginative and, therefore, active; however, this active operation cannot be performed without taking account of the restrictions placed on it by the temporal quality of the events that have to merge into the unit. To me, this operation seems to be described better by Edward Said:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are ‘off’ and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I’d like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. That skepticism too is one of the themes I particularly want to hold on to. With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.\(^{14}\)

These are the words with which Edward Said ends his autobiography, significantly entitled *Out of Place*. The identity thought by Said is neither passively linked to a particular place, nor entrusted to the outcome of a composition operation performed by freely putting together elements lacking in individual quality. Identity is almost a place, but a fluid place (the image used by Said is a river) crossed by intersecting currents. The currents cannot be moved here or there without resorting to difficult ploys; they have their own autonomous route. The freedom that Said speaks of with relation to identity is, therefore, more muddy than that form of freedom which according to Sen we use to put different types of belonging together in a composite identity. Said uses the Latin word *inventio* to define it.\(^{15}\) “In Latin, *invencio* [sic] is to find again. It was used in classical rhetoric to describe a process by which you find past experiences and rearrange them to give them *eloquence* and *novelty*. It’s not creating from nothing, it’s reordering.”\(^{16}\) And, making direct reference to Vico, Said added: “First, under the influence of Vico, I saw […] that

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16 Ibid.
we can make our own beginnings. That they are not given, they are acts of will.” By using, as Vico did, two oxymoronic terms – *find again* and *invent* – with reference to human identity, Said defines the nature of the *space* itself in which the identity is constituted. Our origins can also be invented and be the result of an act of will but of an act of will that works with elements having a qualitative life, which are the restrictions of the inventor’s activity.18

3. Religious Identity and Public Space

This notion of identity, critical but grounded, is very different from what modernity had inaugurated and placed at the bottom of ethical and political reflection. It had been Kant who theoretically concluded a process begun centuries earlier and who singled out reason, purified from all memories (biological, individual, social and cultural), as the organ with which to identify what he defines the universally valid criteria of free, moral and right individual choices. This is how Kant defined an emphatic concept of human freedom that consists in the ability to set off a new causal series in time, a causal series not conditioned by the space-time connection within which the choice is made, not conditioned by memory. This emphatic concept of freedom also concerns the notion of identity. For Kant human identity is characterized precisely by the possession and exercise of that emphatic form of freedom, totally free of all memory.

I am not interested in calling into question the whole philosophical and ethical meaning of Kant’s theoretical move. However, it is useful to bring it up. If the virtuous relationship between *universalism* and *contextualism*, which had been the positive outcome of late 20th-century debate in its proposal to make significant corrections to practical Kantism, has again been called into question by the events that we have had to witness in recent years and if today the most difficult problem seems to be reconsidering if and how each person’s religious identity can be positively transported into the democratic public space, the theoretical outcome of the discussion leading to this compromise needs to be re-examined in part. The thesis upheld by Urbinati in her contribution is that while at the theoretical level the problem of cultural difference was metabolized in the debate in the last twenty years of the 20th century – Urbinati quotes Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Michael


18 On all this see the contribution by Giuseppe Cacciatore. See also Cacciatore and Gessa Kurotschka (eds.), *Il sapere poetico e gli universali fantastici*.
Walzer, Charles Taylor and finally Political Liberalism by John Rawls – it has blown up again at a different level, at the level of public judgment. It is precisely Urbinati’s reference to public judgment that I deem in this context to be particularly relevant. Indeed, it seems that the most useful theoretical approach to the question under discussion is the very approach that deals with it from the viewpoint of how the judgment, and, therefore, the political space, is made up. They are philosophical categories that Hannah Arendt put forward for theoretical discussion, categories upon which the late 20th-century debate also dwelled. These categories are useful to refer to and allow us to rethink the issue under discussion.\(^{19}\)

In her political reflection, Hannah Arendt centers her interest around the way in which political subjects are constituted. It is different to open up an interest in political subjects than to open politics towards cultural identity. It is, notoriously, a reference to Kant’s Critique of Judgment that Arendt uses to single out the judicial subject as a being who is neither simply sensitive nor simply rational nor simply social but sensitive, rational and social at the same time.\(^{20}\) It is significant to remember the importance that Hannah Arendt gives to the reference to political subjects. If we conceive of public space as a place commonly made up of human beings capable of judgment, then that space will not be a place in which its inhabitants have to set aside their memory (biological, individual, cultural and religious) nor a place which can only be accessed by acritically clinging onto our memories.

For Arendt, how is the relationship between past and future regulated? A well-known collection of essays written by the philosopher at the time when she had already begun to reflect on what in the New York lessons she would call the political theory that Kant never wrote is called Between Past and Future.\(^{21}\) In the introduction to Between Past and Future, published in 1961, to explain the nexus that needs to be established between past and future she quotes a parable by Kafka.\(^{22}\) The scene described in the parable takes place on

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\(^{22}\) “He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his
a battlefield where the armies of the past and future are fighting. Among these armies we find the human being, who Kafka calls “He.” In order to retain his position, “He” has to battle against both forces in the fight. In the parable, “He” dreams of leaving the battle line of the two forces. Hannah Arendt comments on this dream with the following words: “what else is this dream [...] but the old dream which Western metaphysics has dreamed [...] of a timeless, spaceless, suprasensuous realm as the proper region of thought?” Instead, for Hannah Arendt the proper region of thought is not the one singled out by the metaphysical dream. There is no spaceless, timeless position that is not conditioned by sensitivity. Human life is the life of a sensitive being and not just a rational being and it is played out in the time and space that is shared with other human beings. If “He” can only stand on the battle line between past and future and cannot leave it behind, according to Hannah Arendt his position is not passive. Despite not being able to realize the metaphysical dream of being situated in a spaceless, timeless and suprasensuous dimension, for Arendt “He” is situated in a cleft in time, in the place where past and future meet.

Ideally, the action of the two forces [...] should result in a third force, the resultant diagonal whose origin would be the point at which the forces clash and upon which they act. [...] This diagonal force, whose origin is known, whose direction is determined by past and future, but whose eventual end lies in infinity, is the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought. If [...] ‘He’ were able to exert his forces along this diagonal, in perfect equidistance from past and future [...], he would not have jumped out of the fighting line and be above the melee as the parable demands [...]; but he would have discovered – pressed as he was by his antagonists into the only direction from which he could properly see and survey what was most his own, what had come into being only with his own, self-inserting appearance – the enormous, ever-changing time-space which is created and limited by the forces of past and future; he would have found the place in time which is sufficiently removed from past and future to offer ‘the umpire’ a position from which to judge the forces fighting with each other with an impartial eye.

For us Hannah Arendt’s words contain a precious indication. There is a space in which we, as human beings, are located. This space is situated in a cleft that “He” creates in the continuity connecting the past and the future, a space fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment [...] he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other” (Ibid., p. 7).

23 Ibid., p. 11.
24 Ibid., p. 12.
belonging to humans, a space that only exists thanks to the appearance of the human being, or rather it is the space that allows the human being to appear. This space is the space of politics and it is a space which everyone enters laden with memories.

In a fragment published after her death, in which Arendt asked herself *What is politics?*, the philosopher identified politics as the place of freedom. Of interest to us is the specific definition that Arendt gives to political freedom. In the fragment Arendt not only underlines the ability to judge autonomously, but also the freedom to dialogue. Why is the freedom to dialogue so relevant for the philosopher?

we know from experience that no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which corresponds to his standpoint in the world and is determined by it. If someone wants to see and experience the world as it ‘really’ is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and links them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk about it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against one another. Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides. Living in a real world and speaking with one another about it are basically one and the same, and to the Greeks, private life seemed ‘idiotic’ because it lacked the diversity that comes with speaking about something and thus the experience of how things really function in the world.25

The ability to judge can only be humanly exercised in a dialogue through which the common space, the human world is constituted by comparing the different ways in which everyone idiosyncratically sees it. The common space becomes objectively visible from every side through this dialogue in which all human beings must be allowed to take part.

wherever human beings come together – be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically – a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another. Every such space has its own structure that changes over time and reveals itself in a private context as custom, in a social context as convention, and in a public context as laws, constitutions, statutes, and the like.26

26 See Ibid., p. 106.
Common space is made of *customs, conventions* and *laws*. In this space, made of customs, conventions and laws, the political subject is not transported like a flowing river. According to Arendt, the space of politics is not *impersonal*. In totalitarian regimes, external *coercion* and internal *duress* regulate the subjects’ movement. Instead, democracies have the task of giving individuals the conditions to act and, that is, the possibility for them to *dialogue*, to speak together and compare the different way in which the world shows itself to everyone. Political space is the common space in which, through dialogic comparison, our judgments as idiosyncratic persons are transformed into judgments that make what we are talking about visible from every side. It is a space into which everyone transports their own past made up of *customs* and *conventions* imbued with a *qualitative value*. Dialogue is the place in which what the political subjects bring into the common space has to be rethought through comparison with what the others take there. This is the presupposition so that memory is transformed into *laws, constitutions, statutes and the likes*.

4. Memory Politics and Religious Experience

The problem of what we have called *memory politics* in Western democracies today focuses on the political subjects’ religious belonging. At present the relationship between religion and democracy is being dealt with in a broad international debate, the complexities of which I cannot lay out here. The original motivation for this debate was the challenge posed by Islamic political theology to secularized Western democracies. Both from a historical and a theoretical point of view, secularization is an experience that has not touched on Islam, however, it is an experience that it is currently having to face up to. Here I am not interested in asking whether Islam will undertake the path towards secularization and, if it does, how it will be undertaken (what is more, quite a controversial question). Rather what I am interested in is thinking

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29 The debate within Islam is now so broad and complex that it has become difficult for non-specialists to find their way in it. See at least what one of the most controversial theorists writes on the discussion I have referred to: T. Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
of how the comparison with political theology, the memory of which Islam transports to the present, has reopened both historical and theoretical reflection in the West on the process of secularization. It is in particular the approach to the issue taken by Charles Taylor, who deals with it from the viewpoint of the phenomenology of the religious experience and therefore wonders what it means to live as a believer in the secularized democracies, which is relevant in the context of the problems posed by memory politics. Taylor’s radical question can be put as follows: can the believer act out his faith in the public and social sphere of the Western democracies or does he have to forget his religious belonging when he enters the public space or acts in society? Taylor’s diagnosis is that while until the 16th century having faith was not one option among several but the “background” to the experience within which human beings lived their personal, social and political lives, today having faith is not just one option among many more but it is also anything but an easy option to choose. It is difficult to live as believers, so Taylor concludes, because the social and public spaces are constituted against the “background” of an immanentist metaphysics that “naturalizes” the option of non-believer.

If Taylor’s diagnosis is correct, what is at stake in the difficult dialogue with Islam is precisely what he called the “background,” the “image” at the basis of how the democratic public space and the spheres of social action are made up. The fact is that liberal and democratic cultures have lost sight of what the religious experience represents for human beings. The need to “spiritualize” the social spheres and public space that Islam, even democratic Islam, is working on, a requirement that has also been deeply echoed in the Christian field, first of all under the papacy of John Paul II and now today under Benedict XVI, brings to mind another era, it brings to mind political theology, times that had been forgotten, in which every aspect of life was imbued with “transcendency.”

In the sphere of the international debate on secularization broad agreement has been reached on the fact that the presupposition anticipating disenchantment was wrong; science has not brushed aside religion by privatizing it, nor could it have done so. The question that is still open concerns the way in


31 I believe that one of the credits of Taylor’s approach is that it has reopened an important discussion centered around the phenomenology of the religious experience and thus it expands the theoretical toolbox of liberal culture.
which the social spheres and the public space have to be rethought if the presupposition of social theory and political theory is that religion is a fundamental human experience, an experience today lived against the “background” of what Taylor defines the *immanent frame*. In the seminar “Rethinking Secularism. The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere,” held at New York University at the end of 2009, the distance between Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, who moderated the debate and led the discussion, centered precisely around this point. Habermas appreciates the function that religion can have in stabilizing the democratic public sphere in a moment in which “markets […] are displacing social solidarity – i.e. the coordination of action through values, norms, and language use oriented to reaching understanding – from ever more domains of social life.” Naturally the positive function of replacing a lay rationality laden down with translated ethical contents that can be played religion in democratic stabilization is credible, without running the risk of fragmentation, if religions are able to adopt what Habermas calls *reflexive self-distantiation*. The point is, Habermas writes, whether cultures will be able to “transform their original religious orientation” and uncouple “thin, generally acceptable – and in this sense ‘secular’ – beliefs from thick descriptions and arguments that depend on particular religious or existential worldviews” and if, in this case, “the multicultural world society [will] develop towards a functional specification of religious traditions and communities that preserve their public influence, yet without prejudicing the secular, ‘freestanding’ legitimation of politics and law.” Instead, for Taylor the problem cannot be so easily resolved because it does not concern the definition of religion’s public function alone. “Democracy requires,” Taylor writes, “that each citizen or group of citizens speak the language in public debate that is most meaningful to them. Prudence may urge us to put things in terms which others relate to, but to require this would be an intolerable imposition on citi-

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32 See Taylor, *A Secular Age*.
33 The conference materials are forthcoming but the brief speeches by Habermas and Taylor can be listened to on the Habermas site: <http://www.habermasforum.dk/>. On the same site is the transcription of a dialogue between the two philosophers which took place on occasion of the NYU conference in question.
35 Id., “The Resurgence of Religion – A Challenge for a Secular Self-Understanding of Modernity?,” paper given to the *Società Italiana di Filosofia Politica*, Rome, September 13, 2007. The English version of this paper is unpublished, however, the Italian translation of this paper “La rinascita della religione: una sfida per l’autocomprensione laica della modernità?” can be found in Ferrara (ed.), *Religione e politica nella società post-secolare*, pp. 24-41. See in particular p. 33.
36 Ibid.
Therefore, for Taylor the question is the human significance of the religious experience. And even if religion’s retreat from the public square is a given fact “[i]n one way this is inevitable and in the circumstances good. Justice requires that a modern democracy keep an equal distance from different faith positions,” we must face up to the requirement posed by believing citizens to also structure the political and social space using ethical and religious criteria. Therefore, Taylor does not propose alternative theoretical solutions to those of Habermas; however, he does underline the fact that what still seems to almost everybody the best justice theory we possess, that of John Rawls, does not permit us to resolve in a fully satisfactory manner the issues that a good memory politics has to deal with.

Changez, the reluctant fundamentalist in the novel by Hamid, may not have laughed upon seeing the attack on the twin towers had he had the experience of living a political and social space in which ethical matters had had the chance to hold their own. An important step in the journey leading Changez, hired after graduating from Princeton by a Manhattan financial consultancy firm with the task of planning the reorganization of companies in trouble in the most diverse parts of the world, back to Pakistan is his inability to continue his work for Underwood Samson, whose motto was to model the future with no concern for the past. Changez is in Chile and has to plan the reorganization of a struggling publishers. While at lunch with Juan-Bautista, the chief of the publishing company in Valparaiso that Changez has the task of reorganizing, the episode takes place that causes him to leave his work and go back to Pakistan. “When we were seated,” Changez recounts, “and [Juan-Bautista] had ordered on our behalf, he said, ‘I have been observing you, and I think it is no exaggeration to say, young man, that you seem upset. May I ask you a rather personal question?’ ‘Certainly,’ I said. ‘Does it trouble you,’ he inquired, ‘to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?’ ‘We just value,’ I replied. ‘We do not decide whether to buy or sell, or indeed what happens to a company after we have valued it.’ He nodded; he lit a cigarette and took a sip from his glass of wine. Then he asked, ‘Have you heard of the

38 Ibid., p. 532.
39 To sum up the controversial point of the discussion, Craig Calhoun who coordinated the dialogue between Habermas and Taylor, states: “It seems to me that the stronger difference is that, in effect, you are saying (he means Taylor) that it is impossible to abstract from, or prescind from, the difference among deep commitments, comprehensive worldviews, et cetera, whether they are grounded religiously or otherwise. So the fundamental discursive issue is that you can’t abstract enough to carry on the discourse and settle things discursively, from any of these kinds of deep constitutive commitments. So religion is not a special case.” Taylor comments: “Yes, that’s right!” See the site on Habermas cited above.
janissaries?’ ‘No,’ I said. ‘They were Christian boys,’ he explained, ‘captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to.’ He tipped the ash of his cigarette onto a plate. ‘How old were you when you went to America?’ he asked. ‘I went for college,’ I said. ‘I was eighteen.’ ‘Ah, much older,’ he said. ‘The janissaries were always taken in childhood. It would have been far more difficult to devote themselves to their adopted empire, you see, if they had memories they could not forget.’”

(Translated from Italian by Karen Whittle)

Vanna Gessa Kurotschka
University of Cagliari