A Multicultural Social Ethos: Tolerance, Respect, or Civility?[1]

Forthcoming in Gideon Calder and Emanuela Ceva (Eds.), *Values, Diversity and Differential Treatment: Multicultural Europe in Theory and Practice*, submitted for inclusion in Routledge/UACES Contemporary European Studies Series.

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1. INTRODUCTION

An ethos is something a people or a community shares; according to the *OED* it is their 'characteristic spirit', 'prevalent tone of sentiment' or the 'genius of an institution or system'. So to speak of a 'common' or 'shared' ethos is in a sense to repeat oneself. If one nevertheless speaks in this way, it is therefore most likely because one is thereby trying either to *characterise* the people or community in question or to make sense of talk about there *being* a people or community, rather than many, or both. One obvious reason for doing this is that there might be an existing, identifiable system or institution that unites, or at least applies to, a population, and that one might want to look for or create further non-institutional commonalities within this population. This is most likely the case in attempts to locate or formulate a common European ethos; in a Europe of common institutions, the question is whether there is something more that binds Europeans together. The

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the UACES conference *Exchanging Ideas on Europe*, Edinburgh, September 2008, and at the Centre for the Study of Equality and Multiculturalism, University of Copenhagen, October 2008. Thanks to comments from Lynn Dobson, Charles Girard, Claus Hansen, Gro Hellesdatter Jakobsen, Signe Kjær Jørgensen, Morten Ebbe Juul Nielsen and Enzo Rossi.

political agenda is that there should be, since European institutions might work better and the aims they serve might be better achieved if Europeans also form a community in a non-institutional sense. Hence the quest for a common European ethos or 'identity' as pursued by agents as diverse as the European commission and philosophers like Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida.[2]

The example of a European ethos highlights the fact that the search for a common ethos is often, at least partly, motivated by a worry about the negative effects of internal diversity; in the European case, a worry that the differences among the peoples of different European states might be an obstacle to the formation of a European people or community and thereby to the achievement of the aims of European integration more generally. But differences among peoples identified by reference to their citizenship of separate nation-states are not the only, and sometimes not the most important and politically salient, kind of diversity. European society is also highly differentiated along other lines cutting across the national divisions, and some of these cleavages pose potential political problems, both at the level of nation-states and at the European level. This paper concerns the perhaps most discussed kind of difference these days, namely cultural, ethnic and religious diversity resulting from the history of immigration to Europe from non-western 'third countries'. This diversity is usually labelled *multiculturalism*, where this is understood not as denoting just any kind of cultural pluralism, e.g. cultural differences between majority nations of European nation-states or among 'life style cultures', but as the presence of specific kinds of cultural, ethnic and religious minorities due to immigration, with Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa and their descendants as by far the most prominent and debated example.

[2] J. Habermas and J. Derrida, 'February 15, or: What binds Europeans', in J. Habermas, *The Divided West*, Cambridge: Polity, 2006, pp. 39-48.

The question concerns the meaning and theoretical possibility of a common ethos that could be shared and ease interaction across multicultural differences. So while any talk of a common ethos will often be motivated by concerns about some underlying plurality, the present discussion is concerned with a shared ethos that is *pluralistic* in the specific sense that it could unite people across and handle the difference of cultural and religious values characteristic of a multicultural society. The question of a multicultural *social* ethos goes beyond the familiar question about what kinds of *institutions* different cultural groups must accept for a multicultural society to be possible, e.g. the debate about the compatibility of Islam and liberal democracy; it is about the further conditions for how people from different cultural groups can interact in civil society and 'get along' socially.[3] This is a European issue insofar as Europe and its constituent states are in fact multicultural; a multicultural social ethos would be one way of achieving 'unity in diversity'.

There is a normative aspect to the discussion as well. 'Multiculturalism' not only denotes the *fact* of diversity, but also a certain family of political positions and derived policies towards it. From such *normative* points of view, a common ethos might be desirable and even required in a variety of ways. At the most ambitious level, multiculturalism is a label for political theories according to which justice under conditions of factual multiculturalism requires not only the traditional liberal sets of individual civil, political and social-economic rights, but also group differentiated policies and measures in the form of group rights, exemptions, protections, support for and symbolic 'recognition' of minority identities and cultures.[4] Such theories are of course contested.[5] But while

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[3] J.G. Stein, 'Searching for Equality', in J.G. Stein et al. (eds.), *Uneasy Partners: Multiculturalism and Rights in Canada*. Waterloo, On: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2007, pp. 19-20.

[4] C. Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Rev. edn. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*. Oxford:

most formulations as well as criticisms of normative multiculturalism have focused on political-institutional requirements, e.g. legally enforceable rights and formal institutions, there is actually an additional issue. This issue precisely concerns multiculturalism as a non-institutional social ethos, i.e. a certain manner of horizontal social interaction among ordinary people in civil society rather than a legalised vertical relationship between citizens and state (or Union). Normative multiculturalism is often not only about institutional justice but also a social ideal concerned with how cultural minorities fare more generally. And multiculturalist theories ostensibly only concerned with institutional justice in the liberal tradition may nevertheless imply conceptions of the injustices allegedly faced by minorities that require not only institutional but also social remedies.[6] In both cases, normative multiculturalism explicitly or implicitly involves a commitment to an ethos that is a) *social*, in the sense that how people relate to one another is just as much an issue as how the state relates to them, and b) *multicultural* in the normative sense that it prescribes certain ways of social interaction as appropriate to or required in a multicultural society.

The social aspect of ideals of multiculturalism has some purchase on political reality insofar as actual states are concerned with the social, as well as legal and economic, integration of minorities. A multicultural ethos as something distinct from state multiculturalism policies have for instance been promoted by provincial governments in Canada and the General Teaching Council for

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Oxford University Press, 1995; B. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000; T. Modood, *Multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

[5] B. Barry, *Culture and Equality*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001.

[6] S. Lægaard, 'Galeotti on Recognition as Inclusion', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 11(3), 2008, 291–314, argues this point against A.E. Galeotti, *Toleration as Recognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

England.[7] So a multicultural social ethos is something that might be, and is being, *promoted* politically, in tandem with more traditional (formal, legally enforceable) multiculturalism policies. But it may also be a side effect (intended or unintended, foreseen or unforeseen) of the implementation of multiculturalism policies in public institutions, as suggested by Will Kymlicka.[8] There might also be a multicultural social ethos with no corresponding multiculturalism policies; the state might be strictly liberal in a traditional sense in not adopting any formal multiculturalism policies while nevertheless encouraging some kind of multicultural social ethos within civil society, or such a social ethos might arise independently from any active engagement by the state. These possibilities and their possible desirability are important but strangely neglected issues in the theoretical debates about multiculturalism, which tend to focus on traditional formal and legal measures enacted by the state. Insofar as a multicultural social ethos is not coercively enforced by the state, it is at least less problematic from the point of view of traditional liberal criticisms of multiculturalism than formal multiculturalism policies. And if the normative concerns of multiculturalism include social factors, multiculturalists should be concerned with these as well as with formal state policies. A further reason why multiculturalists should be concerned with a multicultural social ethos is that it may, depending on its precise character, either reinforce and complement or 'suppress debates about how to achieve the original emancipatory aims' of multiculturalism policies.[9]

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[7] J. Garcea, 'Provincial Multiculturalism Policies in Canada, 1974-2004: A content analysis', *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 38(3), 2006, 1-20; General Teaching Council for England, *Case studies on developing a multicultural school ethos and curriculum*. http://www.gtce.org.uk/networks/achieve/learn/multicultural_schools_spring05?view=Standard&view=Print

[8] W. Kymlicka, 'Disentangling the Debate' in J.G. Stein et al. (eds.), *Uneasy Partners: Multiculturalism and Rights in Canada*. Waterloo, On: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2007, p. 139.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40, 147.

Several of these possibilities might be relevant at the European level. Insofar as the European Union is already champions some forms of political multiculturalism, e.g. in its decision to make respect for minority rights one of the accession criteria for would-be members,[10] it might also be interested in fostering a multicultural social ethos. But such an ethos might also arise independently or as a side effect of the commitment to minority rights, and as such it might take more or less desirable forms relative to the aims of European integration, in which case the European Union has an interest in it.

The present paper assumes that there is *some* kind of normative case for a multicultural social ethos in a broad sense, i.e. that it is at least politically *relevant* how people interact socially across cultural differences in civil society and that some forms of interaction are more desirable than others – minimally because of their effects on broader political institutions and the aims they serve and perhaps also on how far society lives up to multicultural ideals. But the paper keeps as neutral a stance as possible with regards to whether a multicultural social ethos is a requirement of justice or merely desirable given a broader social ideal, and which specific theory of multiculturalism is most plausible. Whatever one's positions on these broader issues, the question is how a multicultural social ethos might be characterised. This is the question addressed by this paper.

In the following two prevalent notions within the debates on multiculturalism are considered as candidates for specifying wherein a multicultural social ethos might consist, namely the classical liberal concept of *toleration*, and more specifically *tolerance* as a social virtue, on the one hand, and a general understanding of the concepts of *respect* or *recognition* ubiquitous in writings on

[10] W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 37, 41.

multiculturalism, on the other. The aim is not to assess specific theories of tolerance or respect, but to sketch the general concepts and to consider their usefulness in relation to a multicultural social ethos at an ideal-typical level. It is argued that both notions of tolerance and respect are problematic and at best limited in their applicability and plausibility as candidates for characterising a multicultural social ethos. On the basis of the identified difficulties, the paper considers the notion of *civility* as a theoretical 'third way' between toleration and respect, and the problems this makes salient.

2. NEGATIVE TOLERANCE AND POSITIVE RESPECT

'Tolerance' denotes an interpersonal attitude of individuals towards other individuals,[11] which consists in 'the disposition to refrain from exercising one's power of interference on others' disliked actions and behaviours which are considered important for both the tolerator and the tolerated.'[12] Tolerance is accordingly suited for forms of interaction under conditions of pluralism, which it allows to continue in a non-violent way even when differences are disliked or disapproved of. Tolerance as a personal disposition might accordingly be though appropriate as part of a multicultural social ethos. There are, however, two problems with tolerance as a specification of a multicultural social ethos:

First, because tolerance in the ideal-typical sense assumed here is premised on dislike or disapproval of specific differences, even if it also involves not attacking or suppressing the disliked

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[11] D. Heyd, 'Is Toleration a Political Virtue?' in Melissa S. Williams and Jeremy Waldron (eds.): *NOMOS XLVIII: Toleration and Its Limits*, New York: New York University Press, 2008.

[12] A.E. Galeotti, 'Do We Need Toleration as a Moral Virtue?' *Res Publica* 7, 273–292, p. 274.

difference, it does not make for more than merely non-violent relations; tolerant relations between people will still be antagonistic due to the presupposed negative attitudes, and recipients of tolerance may 'view the fact that the "tolerator" may refrain from acting on his dislike or disapproval as pure condescension, a sort of moral snobbery or arrogance'.[13] Insofar as tolerance often involves the expression of negative attitudes to ways in which others are seen as different, those thus tolerated will be likely to resent being objects of toleration. When disliked or disapproved of differences fall within acceptable limits of tolerance, tolerant relations are better than intolerant ones, but in other respects tolerance hardly seems desirable or as a satisfactory social ideal. If a multicultural social ethos is furthermore a requirement of justice, this is presumably because justice requires more than mere non-violence in relations between people. Tolerance does not provide this 'more'.

Secondly, because tolerance involves disapproval or dislike, there are limits with respect to what kinds of differences are proper objects of tolerance. Tolerance presupposes the possibility of intolerance, so it may not make sense to say that one refrains from interfering with or suppressing ascriptive differences, such as race, ethnicity and sex, which are not modifiable.[14] Even if the existence of some difference is not modifiable, it may still be possible to be intolerant towards it in other respects, e.g. by excluding different people. This indicates that the real objection to tolerance is normative: negative attitudes of dislike or disapproval are simply morally inappropriate when

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 276.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 280.

directed against unchosen and unmodifiable differences for which people cannot be held accountable, such as their skin colour or ethnicity.[15]

Together these two limitations to tolerance suggest that a multicultural social ethos cannot merely or primarily be characterised in terms of tolerance. Many proponents of multiculturalism have responded to these problems with tolerance by proposing that relations in multicultural societies should go beyond mere tolerance to some form of more positive 'respect' or 'recognition'. If tolerance is problematic because it involves a negative attitude to differences and only requires non-interference, what is required in a multicultural society might be positive attitudes to differences expressed in actively accommodating and open behaviour towards differences rather than mere non-interference. To provide a real alternative to toleration, positive respect is demanded in relation to differences in their *specificity*, rather than as mediated by more general formal features: what is demanded is for instance positive respect for specific religions and their various injunctions rather than for a generic right to religious freedom for all citizens, since the latter still allows for the supposedly problematic negative attitudes to differences. Unfortunately there are also problems with specifications of a multicultural social ethos in terms of positive respect:

First, the requirement of a positive attitude is problematic in cases where the differences in question involve 'doctrinal differences', i.e. differences over 'values' or 'conceptions of the good'.[16] Many, although of course not all, of the 'cultural' differences at stake in multicultural societies involve differences over religious beliefs or ethical commitments and derivate practices and behavioural

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[15] *Ibid*., p. 280; L. Green, 'Pluralism, Social Conflict, and Tolerance', in A. Suetman (ed.), *Pluralism and Law*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001, pp. 98-99, 101.

[16] *Ibid.*, cf. J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

expectations. If people disagree about what they take to be important issues of religious truth, it will often not be possible for them to adopt a positive attitude to the beliefs with which they disagree as such (rather than, e.g., others' formal right to hold them or the value of the resulting diversity). This will either be bogus, since an expressed positive attitude will not be genuine and hence amounts to a disrespectful kind of hypocrisy, or it will effectively require that the assumed differences be *transcended* thereby contradicting important principles of freedom of consciousness. If the positive attitude involved is furthermore supposed to be extended equally to all differences in their specificity, it does not amount to any real appreciation of the particular differences in question. If, on the other hand, the positive attitude is actually supposed to consist in a positive valuation of specific differences, then it does not make sense to require the same positive valuation of all differences. These problems extend beyond mere doctrinal disagreements to the extent that practices and expectations are based on particular beliefs. People cannot, for instance, be required to have a positive attitude to Muslim headscarves as such if they fundamentally disagree with the reasons why Muslim women wear them, and Muslims cannot be required to have a positive attitude to what they regard as blasphemous depictions of their prophet by non-believers. For these principled reasons, requirements of positive respect are simply inappropriate in relation to differences that involve disagreement over values or questions of the good.[17]

Requirements that people should actively engage with and publicly express their positive attitude to differences are furthermore implausibly demanding in practice, since it is quite limited how much

[17] C. Sypnowich, 'The Civility of Law: Between Public and Private', in M.P. d'Entrèves (ed.), *Public and Private: Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 108; M. Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue and the Politics of Pluralism*. University park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p. 247.

people in modern societies can in practice do this in relation to particular differences. So positive respect will either become watered down to some vague gesture of acceptance of differences in general, which plays little role in the usually impersonal interactions among people in civil society and does not engage particular differences, or it will be limited to people between whom more personal and intimate relations obtain.

This sketchy and stylised discussion of tolerance and positive respect as elements in a multicultural social ethos suggests that, while the former may play a part in such an ethos, it is generally not enough and sometimes inappropriate, whereas the latter, which is usually offered as an alternative to 'mere' tolerance, demands too much in cases involving doctrinal differences and in most impersonal relations. A plausible multicultural social ethos must therefore involve more than tolerance without generally requiring positive respect or recognition. The problems noted in relation to tolerance and positive respect give some clues, however, as to what a more satisfactory specification of a multicultural social ethos might look like. For one thing, an ethos should somehow distinguish between ascriptive, non-chosen and unchangeable differences on the one hand and doctrinal differences on the other, since different stances seem appropriate in relations to each of these classes of differences. Further, an ethos should strike a middle way between the nearly asocial relations characterised only by tolerance and the too personal and intimate relations wherein positive attitudes to particular differences more properly belong. If the ethos is to unite people across differences, it should go beyond the minimal condition of non-violent coexistence, but since the society in question is modern, pluralistic, differentiated and mostly impersonal, an ethos cannot wish differences or the resulting disagreements away or assume that they can be mediated by close affections characteristic of more intimate communities.

3. CIVILITY

As it happens, the notion of 'civility' as discussed by many theorists of civic virtue and civil society conforms structurally to these requirements. Civility precisely denotes 'an attitude or ethos', 'pattern of judgement' and resulting 'mode of action' relating to the non-institutionalised social interactions among strangers in civil society,[18] which includes but goes beyond mere tolerance and non-violence.[19] The role of civility is twofold: Civility's primary role is *functional*, i.e. to ease social tensions in order to facilitate social interaction and collaboration across differences and the resulting disagreements, which it mainly does by upholding a formal distance and politeness.[20] But civility also has a *moral* role in expressing the equality of all members of a liberal democratic society; the formal courtesies of civility do not only serve pragmatic ends but also serve to *communicate* respect for the equal moral, social and political status of others.[21] Note that the kind of respect communicated by civility is more formal than the positive respect for specific differences proposed by many multiculturalists, precisely because it does not concern specific differences but generic equality. Civility's two functions, although analytically distinct, are closely related in practice, since successful social interaction often requires successful communication of respect; in fact, formal courtesies that are perceived as 'merely' formal may in fact be experienced as haughty, arrogant and offensive, which may have the contrary consequences of undermine interaction.

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[18] E. Shils, 'Civility and Civil Society', in E.C. Banfield (ed.), *Civility and Citizenship in Liberal Democratic Societies*. New York: Paragon House, 1992, pp. 1, 6.

[19] C. Calhoun, 'The Virtue of Civility', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29(3), 2000, 251-275, pp. 256, 261; R. Boyd, 'The Value of Civility?' *Urban Studies* 43(5/6), 2006, 863–878, pp. 865-66, 871.

[20] Shils, *op.cit.*, p. 4; Kingwell, *op.cit.*, pp. 44-45, 218-220; C. Mayo, 'The Binds That Tie: Civility and Social Difference', *Educational Theory* 52(2), 2002, 169-186, p. 171; Boyd, *op.cit.*, p. 863.

[21] Shils, *op.cit.*, pp. 3-4; Kingwell, *op.cit.*, p. 247; Calhoun, *op.cit.*, pp. 255, 260; Boyd, *op,cit.*, pp. 865, 872.

In addition to both encompassing some forms of tolerance and respect, civility is also *differentiated* in the sense that it means different things to be civil in relation to everyday social interactions, on the one hand, and in political discourse, on the other. In relation to everyday, face-to-face social interaction among strangers, civility involves politeness, 'good manners', courtesy and temperate speech.[22] This kind of civility is variously called 'private' or 'formal',[23] or 'civility of etiquette'.[24] Private civility functions as 'constraints on the social enforcement of morality',[25] which is important since people disagree about what is morally required and 'moralising' attitudes therefore tend to create tensions and conflicts. Note that, while this is called 'private' civility, it concerns social interactions among strangers, not relations that are private in a stricter sense, e.g. the family or intimate personal relations.

As distinct from private civility, what is variously called 'public', 'liberal' or 'substantive' civility[26] are 'non-legislated standards of behaviour'[27] that apply to contentions over and decisions about public or political issues. Public civility is accordingly characterised by its 'referent objects',[28] which, rather than the quality of the daily life, are concerned with 'the common good of society as a

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[22] Shils, *op.cit.*, pp. 3-4; Calhoun, *op.cit.*, p. 257; M.J. Meyer, 'Liberal Civility and the Civility of Etiquette: Public Ideals and Personal Lives', *Social Theory and Practice* 26(1), 2000, 69-84, p. 70; Boyd, *op.cit.*, p. 864.

[23] Shils, *op.cit.*, p. 5; Boyd, *op.cit.*, p. 864.

[24] Meyer, *op.cit.,* p. 71.

[25] W.A. Edmundson, 'Civility as Political Constraint', *Res Publica* 8(3), 2002, 217-229, p. 218.

[26] Shils, *op.cit.*, p. 5; Meyer, *op.cit.*, p. 72; Boyd, *op.cit.*, p. 864.

[27] M. Sellars, 'Ideals of Public Discourse', in C.T. Sistare, *Civility and Its Discontents: Essays on Civic Virtue, Toleration, and Cultural Fragmentation*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004, p. 18.

[28] Shils, *op.cit.*, pp. 4-5.

whole'.[29] To be 'civil' in discussions about public or political issues 'refers to the condition of being a member of a political community'.[30] The most famous formulation of what this requirement consists in is John Rawls's 'duty of civility', which is a moral, not a legally enforceable, duty requiring citizens 'to be able to explain to one another on ... fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason'.[31] This 'liberal civility' is 'a core aspect of the disposition for a reasonable public dialogue that is called for by adversarial politics. This requires having and sustaining dialogue between political antagonists who may share few assumptions about public life and may also believe that at least some of their deepest interests conflict'.[32] While public civility requires that actual claims are being made, in a way concerned with public justification, political compromise and mutual intelligibility, it does allow for some forms of offence, rudeness, impoliteness or even 'some considerable insult' not allowed by civility of etiquette.[33] So whereas private civility 'often means changing the subject when disagreement looms', in politics 'changing the political subject – whether by taking it off the agenda "once and for all" or by "benign neglect" – is decidedly non-neutral, and ought not be confused with extending the courtesy of civility to advocates of reform.'[34] While private civility is to be indirect, formal and to avoid conflict and offensiveness, 'in politics, the civil thing is to be candid, to speak frankly'.[35]

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[29] *Ibid.*, p. 8; Kingwell, *op.cit.*, p. 222; Sellers, *op.cit.*, pp. 15-16.

[30] Boyd, *op.cit.*, p. 864.

[31] Rawls, *op.cit.*, pp. 137, 216–17, cf. Meyer, *op.cit.*, p. 74; Edmundson, *op.cit.*, p. 220.

[32] Meyer, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

[33] Kingwell, *op.cit.*, p. 245; Meyer, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

[34] Edmundson, *op.cit.*, p. 228.

[35] Sypnowich, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

The specific requirements of public and private civility are of course debatable. The claim made here is not that any particular proposal, e.g. Rawls' 'duty of civility', is right, but that there is a distinction between public and private civility and that public civility, while possibly involving requirements of public reason that do not apply in ordinary social interaction, generally allows for more direct expressions of disagreement and resulting conflicts than private civility. It is true that actual political debates, while sometimes uncivil, are also often more civil than many social interactions. But this does not necessarily show that public civility is more demanding than private civility; rather, it might merely show that ordinary social interaction falls even more short of reasonable expectations of civility than public debate does.

From its structural features, civility seems to provide an alternative to both mere tolerance and positive respect, which solves the problems faced by each. Since civility requires an 'active' and 'positive sociability'[36] and limits the expression of dislike and disagreement, it apparently avoids the defects of tolerance. But because it remains formal, i.e. 'modifies and qualifies conduct without specifying its content' and stops short of 'the intense moral solidarity dictated by ascribed identities of family, kin or tribe',[37] civility mediates social conflict without requiring total agreement,[38] thereby avoiding the defects of requirements of positive respect for specific differences. And this is not a bad thing, since civility still expresses a more formal kind of respect[39] and may be 'the thickest virtue' or shared purpose one can reasonably expect in modern societies characterised by deep moral complexity.[40]

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[36] Boyd, *op.cit.*, pp. 865, 866.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 864, 867.

[38] Kingwell, *op.cit.*, p. 228.

[39] Calhoun, *op.cit.*; Kingwell *op.cit.*, p. 229.

[40] Boyd, *op.cit.*, pp. 868, 870.

4. Problems for multicultural civility

But the conceptual structure of civility is one thing; its actual normative content, i.e. the specific requirements of the two kinds of civility, as well as the drawing of the distinction between public and private civility in practice, is quite another. This is where the problems arise for any ideal of civility, but these problems may be especially worrisome in relation to the specification of a kind of civility appropriate to a multicultural social ethos. This is due to facts about actual norms of civility and the kind of pluralism characteristic of multicultural societies, which from the point of view of normative and descriptive multiculturalism give rise to two different – although in practice usually related – kinds of problems.

The one problem is that civility in practice consists in following socially established norms.[41] This is apparently a necessary feature of civility, for successful communication of attitudes of respect in impersonal and distant interpersonal relations presupposes established norms that specify what kinds of behaviour count as respectful. The problem is that such norms are conventional and hence culturally specific.[42]

Cultural specificity has been seen as a problem already in traditional notions of civility as applied within racially or class differentiated societies, where civility may function as a mechanism of social exclusion and control.[43] This problem is solvable, at least in principle, by the reform of such norms of civility in more inclusive and egalitarian directions, as the example of American

[41] Calhoun, *op.cit.,* pp. 260, 264.

[42] Kingwell, *op.cit.,* p 43.

[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 231-32; Mayo, *op.cit.,* p. 173; Boyd, *op.cit.,* p. 872.

appropriations of traditional European aristocratic norms of civility illustrates.[44] But this is not as easy a task in a multicultural society, since established norms, even if not race or class specific, are nevertheless culturally specific almost as a matter of definition. And the diversity characteristic of multicultural societies includes, of course, cultural differences. So to advocate any specific norm of civility as appropriate for interactions in a multicultural society is implicitly or explicitly to require cultural minorities to conform to cultural norms, usually those of the majority.

There are two problems with this in relation to multiculturalism. First, a requirement that people follow culturally specific norms of civility amounts to a demand for cultural assimilation, which is precisely what most normative theories of multiculturalism struggle against.[45] Second, whether unjust or not, requirements of assimilation may be divisive in a factually multicultural society,[46] which is what civility, whether multicultural or not, is supposed to avoid.

While the problem of cultural specificity is perhaps inevitable, it need not be fatal to ideals of civility. Insofar as the point of norms of civility is to provide a shared way of expressing formal respect, it is not obvious that the kind of assimilation involved is morally problematic. Just as cultural specificity is inevitable in social and political relations some degree of assimilation of cultural minorities in some respects is inevitable and may be in the interest of minority members.[47] That established norms of civility are culturally specific is in itself not more problematic than the fact that a specific language is usually dominant in a given country so that minorities have to master it to some extent in order to participate in society. Established social norms may of course be

[44] Kingwell, *op.cit.,* p. 240; Calhoun, *op.cit.,* p. 258; Boyd, *op.cit.,* p. 873.

[45] E.g. Parekh *op.cit.*; Modood, *op.cit.,* pp. 32, 46-48.

[46] Sypnowich, *op.cit.*, p. 111.

[47] Cf. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Cirtizenship*, *op.cit.*

problematic, but this is then usually because of specifics about their content, e.g. received ideas that people who are different in certain ways are inferior or not deserving of equal formal respect. Whereas discriminatory substance of established social norms is morally problematic and might justifiably lead to social divisiveness, it is unreasonable if minorities reject norms of civility merely because they are culturally specific.

Where the first set of problems concerns the substantive *content* of norms of civility, the second set has to do with the location of the *distinction* between public and private civility and the difficulty of deciding according to which kind of civility norm the kinds of differences characteristic of multicultural societies should be handled. These questions are important, since public and private civility means different things, which was the reason why civility could claim to avoid or transcend the problems facing tolerance and positive respect. So even if it has problems of its own, the distinction between public and private civility cannot be rejected out of hand without raising these worries again.

The first problem with the distinction arises even on the purely conceptual level and thus plagues any ideal of civility, whether multicultural or not. Private civility is characterised as the modes of interaction appropriate to face-to-face relationships among strangers, i.e. a specification in terms of the kind of social *relationship* in question. Public civility, on the other hand, is characterised as being appropriate in discussions of political and more broadly public *issues*, i.e. a specification in terms of the 'referent objects' of discourse and disagreement. These two characterisations are not equivalent and ground two different distinctions that often do not coincide, as illustrated by the fact that political issues can arise in face-to-face interactions.[48] Moreover, each characterisation is based

[48] E.g. Stein, *op.cit*., p. 15.

on its own normative concern: The prescription of norms of private civility as appropriate to face-to-face interactions between strangers in civil society is based on the pragmatic goal of easing interaction and the derived need to limit tensions arising from the various differences between people. This requires toning disagreements over differences down and private civility is a means for doing this. The prescription of public civility as appropriate to debates over political and public issues, on the other hand, is based partly on concerns for freedom of consciousness and expression a, partly on requirements of political legitimacy.[49] This requires allowing and even encouraging people to express their disagreement with and criticisms of others and public civility is a means of doing this. The fact that the specifications of the proper scope of the two kinds of civility do not correlate neatly but sometimes contradict each other therefore not only means that one has to decide where to draw the line, but also that this decision is not a unconstrained but involves a weighing of different normative considerations. The drawing of the distinction is inevitably controversial under conditions of pluralism, both because a) different people will weigh stability, legitimacy and freedom differently, b) the latter is bound to conflict more with some cultural and religious views than with others, and c) different cultural and religious views will disagree not only over 'private' matters but also over the proper understanding of the 'political', i.e. over what kinds of concerns are legitimate elements in the 'common good'.

One way to solve the problem about the drawing of the distinction is to say that where the line between public and private civility should be is itself a public question, which accordingly should be debated within the framework of public civility.[50] This 'democratic' solution sounds plausible, but it implies that the more disagreement about the demarcation of public from private there is, the

[49] Rawls, *op.cit.*

[50] Sellers, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

more the scope for public civility expands at the expense of that of private civility. So if someone, e.g. Muslims desiring to live according to their religious injunctions without being challenged and required to defend them, thinks that the scope of public civility is too broad so that too many issues are discussed under permissive norms of public civility, the result will be that the scope of public civility expands even further. This is especially likely to happen in multicultural societies, where different cultural or religious groups often disagree over the right answer to this question.

The second problem with the distinction between public and private civility is more specific to the concerns of normative multiculturalism, and arises because of a combination of the fact of the cultural specificity of civility norms and the theoretical indeterminacy of the distinction between public and private civility. The very idea of civility and the implied distinction between public and private civility may of course be rejected as itself unacceptably assimilatory by some cultures or belief systems and by normative theories of multiculturalism hostile to any kind of assimilation. But even if the general idea of civility and the implied distinction between public and private is accepted, a problem still arises for such minimally liberal forms of multiculturalism. This is due to the fact that cultural practices often have doctrinal aspects, so that even if one does not explicitly raise a political issue for discussion, one's behaviour may signal or express ethical or political views of public or political significance. A much debated example of this is the Islamic headscarf, which is not only a piece of clothing but also a religious symbol, the meaning of which is deeply contested but at least signals something about the role of religion in public and about women as having a different status than men. In such cases, the question arises whether public or private civility is appropriate. This is an important issue, insofar as private civility often involves avoiding offensiveness and easing tensions, whereas public civility consists in acknowledging disagreements and raising them directly, which might be found offensive in particular cases, e.g. those surrounding

Muslim headscarves. If issues of public and political importance become salient in a given social setting, is civility a 'virtue of silence' glossing disagreements about these issues over or is it to raise them explicitly for debate and be 'frank' in expressing disagreement and criticism?[51]

This question poses a dilemma for normative multiculturalism concerned with social as well as institutional issues: Minority members will either have to adapt to established norms, and hence change their cultural practices (i.e. a *de facto* requirement of assimilation), or insist on the legitimacy of continuing their cultural practices in social interactions. Multiculturalists are against unnecessary and unjustifiable requirements of assimilation, so they often go for the latter option. But this option either marks minorities as uncivil in the private sense insofar as they confront and challenge established social norms,[52] or involves challenging the established norms politically, thereby moving the issue into political debate governed by public civility. To politicise established norms of civility and specific cultural practices may be the constructive democratic thing to do, and is what is usually recommended by proponents of multiculturalism concerned with the public legitimacy of minority identities and practices.[53] But this move may nevertheless be problematic for multiculturalists for several reasons. First, to raise norms and practices as political issues highlights how minorities diverge from the norm, thereby continually marking minority members as different and as 'difficult'. Second, as noted, since the norms of civility governing political debates about these issues are public rather than private, the political move will allow for – and perhaps even require – the expression of much more adversarial, confrontational and negative views about

[51] Stein, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

[52] Galeotti, *Toleration as Recognition*, *op.cit.*

[53] *Ibid.*; T. Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

minority practices than would be considered 'good manners' under norms of private civility. The effects of the political move will therefore be that members of minorities will not only continually be reminded of their divergence from established norms and experience following their cultural practices as a problem, but will additionally have to accept direct expressions of disagreement, criticism and even outright hostility in ordinary social interactions. While open political debate about norms and practices is a good thing from a political point of view, the combination of public civility with politicising multiculturalism might often have the opposite effect of what multicultural theories concerned with social as well as legal issues strive for, namely that members of minorities will not be able to feel at ease with appearing in public.

5. MULTICULTURAL CIVILITY IN PRACTICE

The idea of a multicultural social ethos and of civility as an important element herein is not only a theoretical possibility; it is also present in discussions of actual conflicts and problems in multicultural settings. To take just one prominent example, Tariq Modood has argued that the Danish cartoons of Muhammad were racist, but 'That does not in itself mean such cartoons should be banned. One relies on the sensitivity and responsibility of individuals and institutions to refrain from what is legal but unacceptable. Where these qualities are missing one relies on public debate and censure to provide standards and restraints. Hence, where matters are not or cannot easily be regulated by law one relies on protest as well as empathy.' Such racist expressions should be 'censured – rather than censored – away'.[54] Modood's view is that conflicts such as that about the Danish cartoons should primarily be addressed and handled within civil society through what has here been discussed as a multicultural social ethos. Modood's approach is supported by Joseph

[54] T. Modood, 'The Liberal Dilemma: Integration or Vilification?' *International Migration* 44(5), 2006, 4–7, p. 4.

Carens, who also calls for 'self-restraint' rather than legal restrictions on expressions and explicitly formulates the relevant kind of self-restraint in terms of civility: 'To offend others violates a norm of civility and respect in engaging with other members of society.'[55]

As the quote from Modood makes clear, his preferred multicultural social ethos involves a distinction reminiscent of that between public and private civility: the primary line of defence against expressions like that of the Danish cartoons is the sensitivity of people to refrain from certain acts of their own volition. If this line is nevertheless crossed, a multicultural social ethos furthermore involves standards and restraints that are applied in public debate. But even though Modood and Carens seem to operate implicitly or explicitly with civility as an important component in a multicultural social ethos, they seem to ignore the substance of the distinction between public and private civility, namely that civility not only applies to two different domains – social interaction and public debate – but also has to set different standards for what civility means in relation to these two domains in order to navigate the combined problems facing tolerance and positive respect. Both Modood and Carens take for granted that one should avoid acts that might offend others not only in private interactions, e.g. not serve pork to Jewish or Muslim dinner guests,[56] but also in public political debates. But even if one should sometimes avoid giving unnecessary offence in public debate, e.g. offence that is not due to the expression of a view about political or public issues, one cannot argue from the inappropriateness of private offence to that of public offence, as Carens apparently does. This is because the standards for when offence is reasonably taken and should be avoided if possible are different in debates over public issues and in

[55] J.H. Carens, 'Free Speech and Democratic Norms in the Danish Cartoons Controversy', *International Migration* 44(5), 2006, 33–42, p. 37.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

private interactions. The Muhammad cartoons clearly fall on the public side of the distinction between public and private civility, no matter where exactly one draws this line, since they (or at least the controversial ones among them) directly addressed important issues of public concern such as terrorism and suppression of women and were explicitly motivated (reasonably or not) by a concern for freedom of speech. It is therefore not obvious that they are condemnable in terms of (any plausible ideal of) civility.[57] Modood and Carens' interventions nevertheless indicate the importance of a multicultural social ethos and of civility as a potentially fruitful way of specifying what such an ethos might consist in.

6. Conclusion

The present paper has sketched the notion of a multicultural social ethos and indicated how such an ethos might be politically important from both the point of view of a concern with social unity under conditions of multicultural diversity and from the point of view of normative multiculturalist theories. Given this importance, the question is what a multicultural social ethos might consist in or involve. The paper has approached this question by examining two ideal-typical ideas prominent in classical liberal and multiculturalist writings, respectively, namely tolerance and positive respect. It is in itself important to note that these notions, both of which have been advanced as appropriate responses to the fact of diversity, may be social virtues or dispositions, and hence elements in a social ethos, as well as political institutional principles. The paper has argued, however, that both tolerance and positive respect are problematic in relation to multicultural diversity, the former because it involves negative attitudes to difference and may therefore be socially divisive and

[57] S. Lægaard, 'The Cartoon Controversy as a Case of Multicultural Recognition', *Contemporary Politics* 13(2), 2007, 147-164, p. 160.

because it is morally inappropriate in relation to unchosen, ascriptive differences, the latter because it is unreasonably demanding in relation to ‘doctrinal’ differences over ethical or political issues and is often difficult to make sense of in practice. The paper has argued that the notion of civility provides a structurally satisfactory answer to the combined problems facing tolerance and positive respect, since it involves but goes beyond tolerance without requiring expressions of positive valuations of differences and is differentiated in a way potentially answering to the distinction between ascriptive and doctrinal differences. Civility also has its problems, however, since norms of civility are apparently inevitably culturally specific in practice and since the distinction between public and private civility is both conceptually unclear and might in practice exacerbate rather than resolve the social problems of concern to normative multiculturalism.

The result of the discussion is unfortunately predominantly negative, insofar as it has mainly issued in a list of unresolved problems facing tolerance, respect and civility. The proper response to this result is not necessarily to assume that there must be a yet unexamined alternative which resolves all the noted tensions and problems. Although this possibility has not been ruled out, an alternative, and arguably more plausible, explanation for the persistence of tensions facing an ethos of civility is that the situation to which it is applied is complicated and raises different normative concerns often pulling in the different directions. Precisely because multicultural situations are complex, a pluralistic model like that of civility arguably provides a more appropriate response than monistic demands for toleration or respect. The remaining problems need not be theoretical defects but may be useful symptoms or indications of the normatively relevant fault lines in multicultural social reality. Understood thus, the list of apparent theoretical failures is just as much a check list to be continually kept in mind in all attempts to address and handle multicultural diversity, including attempts to formulate, evaluate and possibly justify particular forms of multicultural social ethi as

appropriate responses to multicultural diversity. The noted problems may be constructive reminders rather than reasons to give up.

To take a few examples, although norms of civility are necessarily culturally specific, this need not defeat any ethos of civility, since cultural specificity is inevitable in most social contexts and practical applications of principles; the constructive lesson is rather to focus on the social function of norms – to provide an established language for communicating formal respect – rather than to take established norms as given merely because they are established. And while the general distinction between public and private civility is both theoretically ambiguous and potentially problematic from a multiculturalist point of view, this is an indication of where the interesting issues are located rather than of an insurmountable defect in any ethos of civility. Civility is a practical ability of individuals to distinguish between different social roles and contexts and to differentiate their behaviour accordingly. As such it is not exhausted by knowledge of the distinction between public and private civility and of the corresponding norms of civility, but crucially also involves an element of judgement, an awareness of the different meanings of and grey areas between public and private, and sensitivity to the practical difference between adopting one set of norms rather than the other in particular social contexts. The noted problems are invitations to consider these aspects of civility as well as to further discuss specific formulations of concrete norms and ways of drawing the distinction.

There is a critical aspect to the discussion of public and private civility, which concerns normative multiculturalism as much as civility. Insofar as normative multiculturalism is concerned with social as well as legal issues, the main concern is often the ability of minorities to appear in public with their specific cultural ‘identities’ without having to conceal them or experience them as burdensome

defects or divergences from what is considered socially acceptable and 'normal'.[58] This multiculturalist ideal rejects a specific way of applying the public/private distinction, namely the classic liberal idea of 'privatizing' differences so that they are tolerated on the condition that they are not invoked in public. Multiculturalists claim that privatization is in effect a requirement of assimilation or that it is otherwise unjust because it places an unreasonable burden on minorities. But while rejecting this use of the public/private distinction, multiculturalism at the same time assumes another version of it: conditional toleration is rejected precisely because the tolerated differences are private in another sense, namely facts about who persons are that they cannot reasonably be expected to change. Conditional toleration is claimed to be unjust for a reason similar to the one canvassed earlier for why social tolerance is often morally inappropriate; the differences in question are facts about who people are, rather than, e.g., political or religious views they espouse. Therefore they are neither appropriate objects of the negative attitudes underlying social tolerance nor something that people can justifiably be required to 'keep out of the public sphere'. So the multiculturalist demand that people should not be penalised in public for being who they are involves a rejection of a political distinction between public and private but assumes a different distinction between the private as the personal and the public as the impersonal.

From the multiculturalist point of view, the problem with civility is the noted tendency that disagreements about the location of the distinction between public and private civility increasingly make differences that are private, in the sense of 'personal', objects of public rather than private civility. But at the same time the reasons for differentiating civility indicate a danger in multiculturalism: the insistence that 'private', in the sense of personal, differences are legitimate in 'public' often runs together two different kinds of private differences, namely ascriptive and

[58] Galeotti, *Toleration as Recognition*, *op.cit.*; Modood, *Multicultural Politics*, *op.cit.*

doctrinal, in relation to which different attitudes are appropriate. While multiculturalists plausibly insist that people are not penalised for their ascriptive differences in the public sphere, they must also accept that doctrinal differences between people, including 'cultural' practices expressing doctrinal views, are proper objects of public debate and discussion. And where dislike of ascriptive differences is morally inappropriate, disagreements over doctrinal differences are not only permitted but may actually be something that should be openly expressed and debated in a liberal democratic society. Because of this, proponents of civility are right to apply different norms of conduct depending on whether doctrinal differences are in play or not. And while multiculturalism is often correct to criticise traditional kinds of liberalism for failing to appreciate the difference between ascriptive and doctrinal differences, multiculturalism itself is only plausible if it also acknowledges that different norms of civility are appropriate in relation to each kind of difference.