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Secular Religious Establishment?

One important type of diversity in contemporary liberal democracies is religious diversity. Debates about multiculturalism have increasingly been focusing on religious diversity. But liberal theories of multiculturalism have nevertheless often assumed that religion should be handled differently from other kinds of diversity. Will Kymlicka (1995) for instance assumed that whereas liberalism required separation of church and state, separation of state and ethnicity was not possible. In this paper I examine secularism as a normative political doctrine claiming that religion and politics should be separated. It has traditionally been taken as more or less self-evident that the adoption of secularism therefore rules out religious establishment in the form of institutional linkages between state and (one or more) church(es). This is the kind of views apparently assumed by Kymlicka and underlying his different treatment of ethnic and religious diversity. But on closer inspection it is in fact not clear that secularism required separation of church and state. Recent works on secularism as a normative doctrine has indicated that secularism is not only a contested concept, but also that even the particular conceptions of secularism proposed by specific theorists are more complex collections of different values, principles and institutional and political mechanisms for implementing these. In this paper I examine conceptions of secularism advocated by theorists as diverse as Rob-

ert Audi and Charles Taylor with a view to discussing whether there might be forms of religious establishment that are compatible with secularism thus understood. I will discuss this in relation to the types of 'moderate' or 'weak' religious establishment that are widespread in Europe, e.g. in England and part of Scandinavia. I will consider how secularism as a political doctrine can be carved up in a) basic values such as equality and freedom of conscience, b) political principles regarding separation of religion and politics, and c) institutional mechanisms. The question is what version of the political principles is really justified on the basis of specific basic values and whether this political principle of separation of politics and religion requires an institutional separation of church and state – or, more precisely, in which respect it does, and whether there are respects in which it does not. The latter possibility opens up the prospect that a 'secular religious establishment' might not be an oxymoron. If this is the case, the final question is whether this conceptual possibility is realised in actually existing forms of religious establishment, or whether they are not compatible with secularism? If so, a discussion of cultural diversity cannot bracket the issue of religious diversity, as Kymlicka did.