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Title: Katha Pollitt and Hallowed Secularism

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9/14/2007--The secular counter-attack in the political sphere continues. Here are two quotes from Katha Pollitt in The Nation's 9/24/2007 issue: "It's one thing to show respect for religious belief in the context of social tolerance in a pluralistic society--freedom of speech, separation of church and state, live and let live--but when Christians make faith a matter of public policy, it becomes hard to explain why nonbelievers should be deferential. If I wanted to live in a theocracy, I would move to Tehran. It's fine with me if a candidate believes in God. Unlike some militant atheists, I don't think it matters for public policy that Obama believes Christ absolves his sins, or that Hillary Clinton hopes God has time to help her pass up dessert. We all believe weird things." There are several things wrong with Pollitt's formulations. For one, theocracy is not an outcome but a process. Iran is a theocracy because clerics get to veto the popular will. But the outcome of a democratic process is democracy and nothing else. So, if a majority of Americans vote to outlaw gay marriage because God says so, that is not, strictly speaking, theocracy, but democracy. Pollitt presumes to judge the motives of voters and to proscribe religious motives. But she does not have the right to outlaw motives. Of course, Pollitt is right that in the public square bad policy proposals are fair game. No one should be deferential because their political opponents are religious. But there is a difference between opposing a policy on its merits and opposing it because it represents theocracy. We should be deferential to the motives of anyone. Martin Luther King's proposals should not have been dismissed simply because he thought he was doing God's will. Pollitt is also wrong in saying that faith doesn't matter to public policy. Of course it does. George Bush's grandiosity is closely tied to his belief that he is following God's will, for example. Therefore, we had better find out what kind of faith candidates for public office have. As for the crack about believing weird things, I hope it is not weird to believe that God wills slaves to be freed. That is what the Old Testament claims. Our Religions make many claims about reality. Many of those claims are directly related to questions of public policy. One such belief is that nations are inherently untrustworthy worshipers of power. I wish we had kept that in mind before we invaded Iraq.