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October 3, 2014: Democracy or Secularism

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Title: Democracy or Secularism

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10/3/2014—In the context of political events in the Arab world, it seems that Americans prefer secularism to democracy. These countries are largely pious and their population may prefer to be governed within a framework of religious law. Americans on the right oppose this, because they are suspicious of Islam, even though they want more religious influence in American public life. Americans on the left oppose this because they don't like religion, even if religion is the choice of the people. You saw this in the ambiguous American response to the military coup in Egypt. Usually the US would vigorously oppose the deposition of a democratically elected government. While we did not support the army in Egypt, we did not signal strong opposition either. Of course democratically elected governments can become tyrannical. But, again, Americans are beginning to see imposition of Islamic forms of life as tyrannical per se. Such forms of life may be destructive or violent—such as cutting off hands for theft—but they are not undemocratic if that is what the majority wants and there are continuing free elections to change policies. Robert Worth is a good example of American opposition to democracy when practiced by religious parties. He writes in the New York Review of Books about Arab Despotism. One example he uses is Tunisia, where an Islamic Party—the Renaissance Party—is practicing normal politics, but has not renounced its desire for an Islamic State with democratic practices. Worth is critical of this stance. But why? The Koch brothers are dedicated to bring about right-wing change through politics. Why not religious believers? Worth also writes that “At some point, the principle of popular sovereignty is bound to collide with the belief in divine guidance.” This is either false—Abraham Lincoln believed in both—or true of everyone in the sense that we all believe in right and wrong and that a majority might choose an evil that would have to be opposed even by force. Germany did. The question is always whether the religious group is really committed to democracy. Protestants for a long time suspected that Catholics were not committed to democracy. But that suspicion has now receded. The same could one day be true of Islamic Parties.