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Why Secularism Will Not Work

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“As the saying goes, be careful what you wish for,” warns Katha Pollitt. Writing in *The Nation*, Pollitt is warning Democrats that their embrace of religious leaders and symbols will lead to embarrassment and disaster. Her proposal — embrace secularism.

Pollitt is one of the most predictably liberal columnists in America. Her [periodic articles](#) in *The Nation* offer a window into the logic of a liberal mind unconstrained by political considerations. She does not trim her sails or pull punches.

As she explains the challenge of the Democratic Party, the Democrats “have been trying to shed their secular image in order to appeal to voters who think Jesus is a Republican.” Well, no political party has any legitimate claim on Jesus, but this doesn’t stop the parties from attempting to position themselves with Christian voters.

For several election cycles, church participation has been among the most trustworthy predictors of electoral choice. Those who actively participate in church life vote in

overwhelming numbers for the Republican presidential candidate. Attempting to cut into that advantage, the two major Democratic presidential candidates both hired staff charged with outreach to the Christian community — and evangelicals in particular. The Democratic Party has made similar moves in advance of the 2008 election.

Added to this, recent Democratic wins in recent special congressional elections have been driven by conservative candidates who are very open about their Christian commitment. Why is Katha Pollitt worried?

In one sense, the secularization of the Democratic Party at the national level can be traced to the election of John F. Kennedy as president in 1960. Kennedy — the first (and as yet only) Roman Catholic to be elected president — dealt with the “religious issue” of his time by minimizing any religious identity. In the parlance identified by John Murray Cuddihy, Kennedy just “happened to be” Catholic.

Later, the Democratic Party embraced a less nuanced form of secularism. The party identified with the secularizing trends of the day, took the more secular side of public controversies, and embraced an agenda that put it on a collision course with many churches and denominations. To a considerable degree, the party identified with an intellectual elite that was religion in general, but conservative Protestantism and traditional Catholicism in particular, as inherently repressive.

The party’s left wing was not pleased with either Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton, both of whom identified themselves as Christians and active church members. The Left went so far as to challenge Jimmy Carter with the insurgent candidacy of Sen. Edward Kennedy when President Carter sought re-nomination by his party in 1980. Carter eventually came to blame the Left for the collapse of his re-election campaign.

Now, Katha Pollitt warns the Democrats not to succumb to the religious temptation. As she sees it, the Party’s only hope is to embrace secularism. She points to the controversy over Rev. Jeremiah Wright (and, on the Republican side, Rev. John Hagee and Rev. Ron Parsley) as ample evidence of her thesis.

Here she presses her point:

If we kept religion out of the election campaign, we could just debate the issues, like rational people. After all, which is less likely, that the HIV virus came out of a government lab, or that the dead will rise from their graves? That Israel is on a course that is not likely to end well, or that God wants more West Bank settlements in order to set off a world war and bring on Christ’s return? Empirical claims we can discuss and debate like citizens; religious beliefs, by their very nature, claim immunity from rational analysis. When men whose profession is the latter weigh in on the former, why should anyone take them seriously?

As Barack Obama has perhaps belatedly learned, the Democrats had it right the first time: Awesome, blue-state, red-state, whatever — keep God out of it, and the men who claim to speak for him, too.

Katha Pollitt’s world is divided between the “religious” people and the “rational” people. If the campaign took a turn to the secular, “we could just debate the issues, like rational people.”

Well, just try it, Ms. Pollitt. You will not get very far. The problems with your theory are many, but the two greatest

problems have to do with the nature of voters and the actual shape of the issues.

Americans are not a secular people. The voters of this land might be confused, misled, manipulated, bored, emotional, disengaged, or inattentive — but they are not secular. Treating the voter as a secular agent will be a recipe for electoral disaster. Beyond this, the issues are not secular. To a greater and lesser extent, the issues reflect the concerns of unsecular people. The most controversial issues dividing the nation are inherently moral issues, and the percentage of Americans who will discuss or decide upon these issues without reference to their religious beliefs is very small.

Secularism does not have much of an electoral future. Even in a more secularized age, voters simply will not “keep God out of it” when it comes to their political instincts and decisions.

The proper way to relate Christian conviction to public policy is a matter of legitimate struggle, discussion, and debate, but “keep God out of it” is not a “rational” proposal. Secularism will not work.

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