



## Secularism Confronts Islam

By Olivier Roy

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The denunciation of fundamentalism in France, embodied in the law against the veil and the deportation of imams, has shifted into a systematic attack on all Muslims and Islam. This hostility is rooted in the belief that Islam cannot be integrated into French—and, consequently, secular and liberal—society. However, as Olivier Roy makes clear in this book, Muslim intellectuals have made it possible for Muslims to live concretely in a secularized world while maintaining the identity of a "true believer." They have formulated a language that recognizes two spaces: that of religion and that of secular society.

Western society is unable to recognize this process, Roy argues, because of a cultural bias that assumes religious practice is embedded within a specific, traditional culture that must be either erased entirely or forced to coexist in a neutral, multicultural space. Instead, Roy shows that new forms of religiosity, such as Islamic fundamentalism and Christian evangelicalism, have come to thrive in post-traditional, secular contexts precisely because they remain detached from any cultural background.

In recognizing this, Roy recasts the debate concerning Islam and democracy. Analyzing the French case in particular, in which the tension between Islam and the conception of Western secularism is exacerbated, Roy makes important distinctions between Arab and non-Arab Muslims, hegemony and tolerance, and the role of the *umma* and the sharia in Muslim religious life. He pits Muslim religious revivalism against similar movements in the West, such as evangelical Protestantism and Jehovah's Witnesses, and refutes the myth of a single "Muslim community" by detailing different groups and their inability to overcome their differences.

Roy's rare portrait of the realities of immigrant Muslim life offers a necessary alternative to the popular specter of an "Islamic threat." Supporting his arguments with his extensive research on Islamic history, sociology, and politics, Roy brilliantly demonstrates the limits of our understanding of contemporary Islamic religious practice in the West and the role of Islam as a screen onto which Western societies project their own identity crisis.

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## Secularism Confronts Islam By Olivier Roy Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1544283 in Books
- Published on: 2009-08-31
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.12" h x .36" w x 5.58" l, .44 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 144 pages

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## Editorial Review

Review

A work of sustained deconstruction, [Roy] takes apart the myths, clichés and prejudices which characterise the current conversation about Islam.

(*The Economist*)

[A] brilliant little book.

(Philip H. Gordon *Foreign Affairs*)

A remarkable book: articulate, original, lucid, without a paragraph that fails to contain an interesting thought.

(Claire Belinski *New York Sun*)

[A] valuable little monograph.

(Martin Levin *Globe & Mail*)

Roy provides a useful corrective to the interpretation of Islamism.

(John Gray *Harper's*)

Superb... a welcome contribution to political science, sociology, religious studies—and statecraft.

(*Choice*)

[A] cogent work.

(*Middle East Journal*)

An insightful analysis.

(Talip Küçükcan *Insight Turkey*)

Rich in theoretical analysis.

(*American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*)

Review

*Secularism Confronts Islam* is an extraordinary book. Important reading for all of those interested in the intersections of religion and politics.

(Amir Hussain, author of *Oil and Water: Two Faiths, One God*)

Olivier Roy's thoughtful and erudite analysis of European Islam is an essential antidote to the fearmongering that makes the world a more dangerous place. Roy's voice is critical, as well as humane. Too wise to fall for easy pessimism, or naive optimism, Roy offers the most valuable thing of all: a deeper understanding.

(Ian Buruma, author of *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*)

#### About the Author

Olivier Roy is research director at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and lectures at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and the Institut d'Études Politiques (IEP) in Paris. His books with Columbia University Press include *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East*; *Globalized Islam*; and, with Amel Boubekeur, *Whatever Happened to the Islamists? Salafis, Heavy Metal Muslims, and the Lure of Consumerist Islam*.

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