



Secularism Confronts Islam

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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