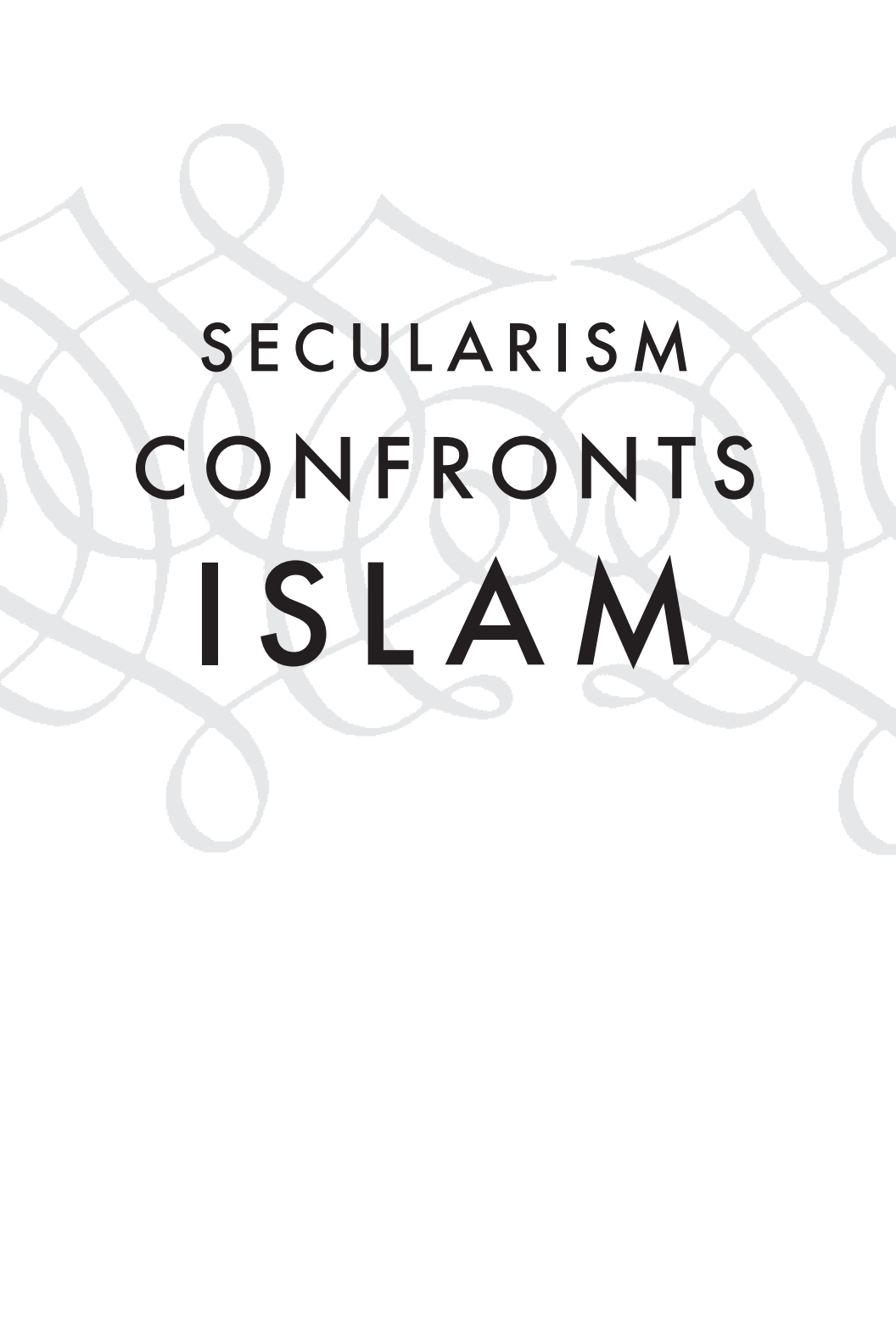


# SECULARISM CONFRONTS ISLAM



**SECULARISM  
CONFRONTS  
ISLAM**

# OLIVIER ROY

TRANSLATED BY GEORGE HOLOCH

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## PREFACE

Islam's encounter with the West is as old as Islam itself. The first Muslim minorities living under Western Christian domination date back to the eleventh century (in Sicily). Yet the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a distinctively new phenomenon: the massive, voluntary settlement in Western societies of millions of Muslims coming from Muslim societies across the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Turkey, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The West has also witnessed the development of an indigenous trend of religious conversion (as in the case of the Nation of Islam). And yet, while a Muslim population has definitively taken root in the West, the question of its integration remains open, especially in western Europe, where there is an overlap between Islam and work-driven immigration—an overlap that is not to be found in the United States. Socioeconomic problems, cultural issues, and political tensions related to terrorism or the conflicts in the Middle East converge around the question: Is Islam compatible with the West? Of course, this question rests on an essentialist worldview, according to which there is *one* Islam, on the one hand, and *one*

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Western world, on the other hand. From that perspective, the West is allegedly defined by a set of values (freedom of expression, democracy, separation of church and state, human rights, and, especially, women's rights). But a problem immediately arises: Are these Christian values? Is the opposition between Islam and the West derived from the fact that the West is Christian? Or is it rather because the West is secularized and no longer locates religion at the heart of its self-definition? Is it Christianity or secularism that makes the West so distinct?

The relation between secularism and Christianity is complex. Either one defines the West in Christian terms, or one defines it in reference to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, human rights, and democracy that developed against the Catholic Church, through first the Protestant Reformation, then the Enlightenment, and finally a secular and democratic ideal. If the Catholic Church has always fought secularism and the separation of church and state (at least until the beginning of the twentieth century), Protestantism has played a more complex role by defending a sort of religious civil society in which the separation of church and state is seen as a necessary condition for a genuine religious revival. Secularization therefore proceeds differently in Catholic and Protestant societies—against faith in the former, along with faith in the latter—to such an extent that it is difficult to talk about *the West*.

Contemporary Western societies, however, are, in fact, secularized, either because the separation of church and state is a constitutional principle (the United States), because civil society no longer defines itself through faith and religious practice (the United Kingdom, Germany, the Scandinavian countries), or because these two forms of secularism converge and reinforce each other, thus giving birth to what the French call *laïcité*. And yet when one opposes the West and Islam, it is by putting forward the Christian origins of Western culture or, on the contrary, by emphasizing its secularism. In other words, when we question Islam's capacity to become "Westernized," we are referring to two different forms of Western-



ization: Christianization and secularization. Of course, things are more complex, and it would be easy to show that Western secularism actually has a Christian origin—as I do in this book. But it is interesting to see that the critique of Islam is today a rallying point for two intellectual families that have been opposed to each other so far: those who think that the West is first and foremost Christian (and who, not that long ago, considered that the Jews could hardly be assimilated) and those who think that the West is primarily secular and democratic. In other words, the Christian Right and the secular Left are today united in their criticism of Islam.

But if Christianity has been able to recast itself as one religion among others in a secular space, why would this be impossible for Islam? Two arguments are usually summoned to make this case: the first is theological and says that the separation between religion and politics is foreign to Islam; the second is cultural and posits that Islam is more than a religion: it is a culture. Both arguments will be addressed in this book. But this theoretical debate, which thrives on op-ed pieces and talk shows, is increasingly solved in the practice of Muslims themselves. The experience of everyday life as a minority brings Muslims to develop practices, compromises, and considerations meant to cope with a secularism that imposes itself on them. This does not mean that Islam has never experienced secularism but only that, with the exception of a few isolated thinkers, it never felt the need to think about it. Today, both life conditions in the West and the domination of the Western model through the process of globalization compel many Muslims to relate explicitly to this form of secularism, somewhat urgently and under the pressure of political events. This reflection spans a very wide intellectual spectrum that goes from what I call neofundamentalism to liberal positions, proceeding through all kinds of more or less enlightened conservatism.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the paradigms and models mobilized in the Western debate over Islam hardly reflect the real practices of Muslims. While the political debate over the potential danger allegedly rep-

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resented by Muslims is more or less inspired by the intellectual debate about the “clash of civilizations,” the help of sociology (that is, the concrete analysis of Muslim practices) is hardly sought—even though sociology is at pains to grasp the concrete forms of religiosity that characterize the practice of Islam within immigrant communities. One must therefore abandon the current models in order to understand how it is possible to practice one’s faith as a Muslim in a secularized Western context. And one quickly realizes then that Muslims tend to find themselves in a position that is closer to that of the born-again Christians or the Haredi Jews than to the position of a stranger.

So far, the West has managed its Muslim population by mobilizing two models: multiculturalism, usually associated with English-speaking countries (the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada) and northern Europe, and the assimilationist model, specific to France. Multiculturalism supposes that Islam as a religion is embedded in a distinct culture that maintains itself from one generation to the next. One can be a good citizen and at the same time identify primarily with a culture that is not the dominant one. In other words, the citizen’s relation to the nation can be mediated by a communitarian sense of belonging. In the assimilationist model (the official term is “integration”), access to citizenship (which turns out to be relatively easy) means that individual cultural backgrounds are erased and overridden by a political community, the nation, that ignores all intermediary communitarian attachments (whether based on race or on ethnic or religious identities), which are then removed to the private sphere. As was declared in the French National Assembly during the vote that granted full citizenship to French Jews in 1791: “They must be granted everything as individuals and nothing as a nation” (in the sense of community). Nothing could be more opposed than the multicultural and assimilationist models: the French consider Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism either as the destruction of national unity or as an instrument of ghettoization, while assimilationism is perceived abroad as the

expression of an authoritarian, centralized state that refuses to recognize minority rights, when it does not infringe on human rights.

Yet the recent tensions that have troubled Western societies since September 11 show that both these models are in crisis. In France, many young Muslims complain that theirs is a second-class citizenship and that they are still the victims of racism, while they are integrated in terms of language and education and accept *laïcité*. Moreover, also in France, young born-again Muslims demand to be recognized as believers in the public space (by wearing a veil, if they are girls). At the same time, the increasing radicalization of a fraction of Muslim youth in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands has led to a shift in public opinion in these countries, whereby the multicultural model is called into question and accused of encouraging “separatism.”

As a matter of fact, both multiculturalism and assimilationism are in crisis for similar reasons: both posit the existence of an intrinsic link between religion and culture. Keeping one’s religion also means keeping one’s culture. Multiculturalism therefore implies that religion remains embedded in a stable cultural background, and assimilationism implies that integration, by definition, leads to the secularization of beliefs and behaviors, since all cultural backgrounds disappear. But the problem is that today’s religious revival—whether under fundamentalist or spiritualistic forms—develops by decoupling itself from any cultural reference. It thrives on the loss of cultural identity: the young radicals are indeed perfectly “Westernized.” Among the born-again and the converts (numerous young women who want to wear the veil belong to these categories), Islam is seen not as a cultural relic but as a religion that is universal and global and reaches beyond specific cultures, just like evangelicalism or Pentecostalism. And this loss of cultural identity is the condition both for integration and for new forms of fundamentalism.<sup>2</sup> Whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, religious revivalism raises the question of the place of religion in the public sphere. The debates about prayers in school, the display

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of the Ten Commandments in courthouses, or the creation of an *eruv* following the request of Haredi Jews to “privatize” public space on Shabbat show that the recasting of the relation between the religious and the public sphere is not specific to Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Why, then, pay so much attention to French *laïcité*, which until now seemed to be an exception? There is today a convergence of the various debates taking place in Western countries: tellingly, they focus on the veil worn by some Muslim women (prohibition of the headscarf in French high schools, increasingly vocal critique of the burka—that is, of the integral veil—in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands). The real issue here is indeed the articulation of religious identity within the public sphere and therefore the question of secularism. This debate started in France in 1989 and was continued in the United Kingdom in 2006, following the declarations against the burka made by the leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw. Is France an exception, or does it represent a real alternative to multiculturalism? Here lies the interest of studying the French model. From a historical point of view, there is indeed a French exception: France may be the only democracy that has fought religion in order to impose a state-enforced secularism. In France, *laïcité* is an exacerbated, politicized, and ideological form of Western secularism that has developed on two levels:

1. A very strict separation of church and state, against the backdrop of a political conflict between the state and the Catholic Church that resulted in a law regulating very strictly the presence of religion in the public sphere (1905). This is what I call legal *laïcité*.
2. An ideological and philosophical interpretation of *laïcité* that claims to provide a value system common to all citizens by expelling religion into the private sphere. I call this ideological *laïcité*: today, it leads the majority of the secular Left to strike an alliance with the Christian Right against Islam.