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### May 30, 2010: The Future of Secularism

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Title: The Future of Secularism

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5/30/2010—Russell Shorto's article in today's New York Times Magazine, *The Integrationist*, illustrates the paths with regard to religion that are today facing secularism in the West. Shorto describes the parliamentary campaign in The Netherlands, in which Labor Party leader Job Cohen might emerge as the next Dutch Prime Minister. Cohen was raised in a secular Jewish home. But as mayor of Amsterdam Cohen fully engaged the Muslim community and engaged after the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in what he called the "peace script". Shorto describes the controversy as follows: "Depending on whom you talk to, Cohen's response to the murder either helped bring about the beginnings of a new idea of society or it has amounted to misguided appeasement of dangerous forces. He initiated the peace script; the on-the-streets information-gathering indicated that Muslim areas of the city were radicalizing. He held a series of public meetings with ethnic and religious communities, and in these he made use of the city's Moroccan alderman, Ahmed Aboutaleb. 'We operated as a kind of couple,' Aboutaleb told me recently. 'It was a kind of city therapy.'" Cohen agrees that immigrants must become part of Dutch society. But he apparently thinks that Islam is not the issue. The issue is social engagement, without which a small minority in the Muslim community will become radicalized. This means that Cohen is willing to support Muslim institutions, such as schools and conservative mosques. This approach is opposed by the anti-religious left. Despite her recent call for Christianity to oppose Islam, I count Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the courageous former member of the Dutch Parliament, who would doubtless have been the next victim had she not fled to the United States, as among that anti-religious group. Shorto quotes her response to Cohen's efforts: "I don't think the plan works," she told me. "The problem is that it assumes you are dealing with European peoples. The most essential factor is that Islam is a conquering philosophy. It's interesting that the only identity that Muslims have in Amsterdam, and in other European places, is as a vulnerable population. And because of that people feel they have to understand them, respect their idiosyncrasies, support them with state money and all will be well. It will not." This is the fundamental disagreement. Is religion a dark force to be banished from public life or is it a positive force? Is religion a relic in a scientific age or is it a source of opposition to existing hierarchical power? Cohen is not a believer but he is obviously not opposed to a public role for religion. He is not preoccupied by the separation of church and state. I think Cohen is the future for secularism and not Ali. And I think this is the path for peace.