Since Sept. 11, it has become fashionable to talk of a "clash of civilizations" between the West and Islam. The world may now be standing on the brink of a long conflict, perhaps a new "cold war" that features small-scale, but spectacular violence. The latest cartoon crisis between Denmark and several Muslim countries was a clear sign of the potential of this conflict to emerge, spread at a fast pace and do much unforeseen damage.

Ole Waever, professor of International Relations at the University of Copenhagen, argues that there is a real danger that the West will once again see only what is wrong with the "other," and will be unable to discern the overall nature and pattern of the conflict. In order to engage in constructive dialogue, he said, it is crucial that we make an effort to understand what drives the clash in the international arena and why both sides feel so threatened by one another.

At first glance, Waever says, the conflict seems to be between two religious blocs, Christianity and Islam. More generally, it is
seen as a clash between the West and radical Islam. But this broad picture obscures what really drives both sides. To the West, a basic principle of government is that religion and politics should occupy separate spheres. On the other hand, fundamentalists -- regardless of their particular religion -- are threatened by having to live within a secularist system. The real conflict, then, is between secularists and fundamentalists.

In light of how critical this conflict is to the security of the world today, Waever said, it is puzzling that the field of International Relations has little to say about its nature. While academia normally plays an important role in finding solutions to troubling world problems, when it comes to the issue of religion, academics are often part of the problem. That is because the principle of secularism is an integral part of modern science, which means that social scientific approaches to religion are biased by nature and against it.

This bias expresses itself by treating science as objective and progressive, while seeing religion as superstitious and backward, a relic of the distant past that should fade away with evolution and modernity. International Relations tends to see religion not as a phenomenon in its own right, but as an effect of something else. Religion is often explained as a tool that political and social leaders use to unite people for their own personal objectives.

By treating religion as an effect, Waever said, social scientists do not understand that it is also a cause of many actions. The highest concern to a religious person is sustaining faith and seeking salvation. In the quest to live according to their faith, committed believers will go to extreme lengths to protect it from a perceived threat, whether that is secularism and modernity or military action. Although many in the West see secularism as a neutral principle, the requirement that one should leave his religious beliefs behind once he enters the public or political realm seems far from reasonable. It is in fact quite threatening to many believers who wish their faith to guide every aspect of life.

Taking religion seriously, both in domestic politics and the international arena, and realizing secularism is not a neutral principle, will help us discern what really motivates the “other” side in the present dominant secular-religious conflict. It will also help us see the many forms of secularism that exist in the West today, Waever argued.

Among Western countries, particularly in Europe and United States, the separation of religion and politics take different forms. What is taken for granted in one context may be unacceptable in another; for example, some countries allow state financial support for religious institutions while others do not. Recognizing that secularism comes in many shapes will help us realize that the boundary between religion and politics is not fixed. Once we understand that this boundary is a matter of debate, our political systems will become more democratic and stand a better chance of integrating all social groups.

The major problem in the current conflict, Waever said, is that both secularists and fundamentalists believe that something very central in their lives is being threatened. One side feels threatened by the growing influence of religion in almost all aspects of life, while the other feels that religion itself is under grave threat. Hence, religion itself has become part of security policy: As both parties think that something central is threatened, each feels justified in doing whatever is necessary, even if that means taking radical measures to counter the threat.

Having been socialized in the secular countries of the West, social scientists may be tempted to see secularism as a basic precondition for any political body. After all, secularism naturally follows from the Enlightenment tradition through which science gained ascendance over religion. But, Waever argued, to religious believers in the United States or in the Muslim world, secularism is not a self-evident precondition or a natural principle, but instead a highly oppressive and problematic doctrine. Secularism as an integral part of modernization is highly threatening to religious people, who are not willing to relegate their beliefs to the private realm. It is even more threatening to fundamentalists who want to implement religion and principles derived from its teachings in all spheres and see no option other than taking drastic measures to combat what they perceive as the degenerative effects of modernity.

The longer we fail to treat secularism as a not-so-obvious, but contentious doctrine that is rejected by religiously oriented people, Waever said, the less we will be able to understand the major conflict of our times and find a solution. If we want to integrate people into their political systems instead of implementing elitist democracies by force, and make pious societies comfortable with modernity, we need to avoid seeing religion as a security issue and open secularism itself to political, democratic debate.