



# The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations

*Tzvetan Todorov*

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The relationship between Western democracies and Islam, rarely entirely comfortable, has in recent years become increasingly tense. A growing immigrant population and worries about cultural and political assimilation—exacerbated by terrorist attacks in the United States, Europe, and around the world—have provoked reams of commentary from all parts of the political spectrum, a frustrating majority of it hyperbolic or even hysterical.

In *The Fear of Barbarians*, the celebrated intellectual Tzvetan Todorov offers a corrective: a reasoned and often highly personal analysis of the problem, rooted in Enlightenment values yet open to the claims of cultural difference. Drawing on history, anthropology, and politics, and bringing to bear examples ranging from the murder of Theo van Gogh to the French ban on headscarves, Todorov argues that the West must overcome its fear of Islam if it is to avoid betraying the values it claims to protect. True freedom, Todorov explains, requires us to strike a delicate balance between protecting and imposing cultural values, acknowledging the primacy of the law, and yet strenuously protecting minority views that do not interfere with its aims. Adding force to Todorov's arguments is his own experience as a native of communist Bulgaria: his admiration of French civic identity—and Western freedom—is vigorous but non-nativist, an inclusive vision whose very flexibility is its core strength.

The record of a penetrating mind grappling with a complicated, multifaceted problem, *The Fear of Barbarians* is a powerful, important book—a call, not to arms, but to thought.

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