

AMSS 38th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Islamic Traditions and Comparative Modernities”

Cosponsored by:
The University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
September 25-26, 2009

Abstract Only – Work in Progress

“Islam and Secularism”

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“Work for your life in this world as though you will live forever, and work for your afterlife as though you will die tomorrow.” This wise saying, which is sometimes attributed to ‘Ali and sometimes to the Prophet Muhammad, echoes the Qur’anic injunction: “Seek by means of what God has bestowed upon you the abode of the hereafter, but do not neglect your portion of this world; and do good, as God has done good to you. These two profound sayings sum up Islam’s attitude towards this worldly life, which we often call *secularism*. Islam insists, in a hadith of the Prophet that there is no “No monasticism in Islam.” Although there have been ascetic individuals and movements in Muslim society, Islam generally rejects asceticism, or renunciation of this world and calls instead for full responsibility of the individual in society, and the responsibility of the Ummah in the world. Although this presentation argues that Islam embraces as one, and the same time, a secular and religious life, it begins by defining secularism, both linguistically and philosophically and then contrasting it with what we call *religious life* or *other worldly life*. As a historian of religion by training, I will, therefore, discuss this issue from the point of view of the different major religions and contrast these with the Islamic understanding of secularism and faith. My purpose is neither to argue for the validity of any religious tradition over another, nor score points for Islam or any other faith. I believe that since both religions and faith-communities interacted and influenced each other throughout their long history, I will present the Islamic view of the religious and secular within the purview of the history of religion.