

# University of Notre Dame

## Strategic Academic Planning Committee

### September 2009

#### PROPOSAL COVER SHEET

**Proposal Type:** Full Grant   X   Seed Grant       

**Proposal Title:** *Contending with Modernity: Islam and Roman Catholicism in a Secular Age*

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**Participants:**

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## I. Abstract

*Contending with Modernity* is a multi-year, multi-disciplinary initiative designed to advance understanding of how the relationship between “the religious” and “the secular” has evolved in modern times. In the coming decades, faith-based and non-religious actors will continue to compete with one another in some arenas, ignore one another in others, and work together on still other critical issues facing humankind, such as sustainable economic development, conflict resolution, political change, and stewardship of the environment. Accordingly, we need a sophisticated understanding of the conditions under which religious and secular forces attract, repel, and sometimes collaborate with one another. In particular, we seek to better comprehend how organizations, institutions, and individuals inspired by faith and committed to a religious tradition interact with a range of governments, private institutions, individuals, and movements for whom religious considerations are marginal or non-existent.

Why begin such an inquiry by focusing specifically on Islam and Roman Catholicism? As the world’s two largest religions, each with more than one billion followers, together they represent virtually one-third of humanity. Furthermore, Catholicism and Islam have uniquely responded to, and also helped shape, the developments associated with modernity. Vying for souls in Africa, Asia, and, increasingly, Europe and North America, Catholics and Muslims have long been wary of one another. While their interactions have sometimes found violent expression, far less attention has been paid to the range of experiences, convictions, and challenges shared by these two global, monotheistic, mission-centered traditions and their adherents as they have encountered the modern world. A foundation for mutual understanding can be identified in their common devotion to the God of Abraham; the exhortation of both the New Testament and Qur’an to evangelize, or convert, all nations; well-developed ethics of the use of force; comparably “traditional” teachings on sexuality, family, and the body; and rich traditions of pursuing justice and caring for the poor. The issues underlying the tensions and commonalities between Islam and Catholicism are historical, political, ethical, cultural, and theological in nature, and thus require a broadly conceived and multi-disciplinary approach.

Accordingly, the purposes of *Contending with Modernity: Islam and Roman Catholicism in a Secular Age* are to explore the interaction between religious and secular modes of belief and practice; to advance knowledge of Islam and Catholicism as local and global communities of faith and culture; and to enhance understanding between Muslim and Catholic scholars, public intellectuals, and religious leaders. Teams of scholars who specialize in Islam and/or Roman Catholicism (including practicing Muslims or Catholics) will work on a discrete research topic of interest to both religious communities. Topics will include democratization, governance, and the nation-state; religious freedom and pluralism; issues surrounding family, gender, and women’s rights; the tension between religious law and secular law; the challenges of modern science, technology, and bioethics; terrorism and the ethics of war and peace; and religious approaches to poverty and development. Through the work of these research teams, the project will generate a series of conferences, symposia, publications, multimedia, and web-based products, aimed at deepening the knowledge of both scholars and the general public. The sustained collaboration of scholars, public intellectuals, religious leaders, and policymakers promises significant impact across the Christian and Muslim worlds and beyond.