

No Picnic
The Dynamics of Culture in the Contemporary Arab World

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In the midst of our constant, understandable, worrying about the political problematic of the Arab and Muslim world, we must be careful not to ignore the equally important and related problematic of the cultural sphere. Underneath the great geopolitical issues, the politics of regimes, and even the national and global issues of law and rights, is a simmering cultural ferment, and it is that ferment which produces the ideological basis of what is possible in the "higher" spheres of law and politics. Laws, after all, are not as powerful as ideologies: laws can try to force women to, or prevent them from, wearing a *burgha* in the street; ideologies can bring people into the street, voluntarily and militantly, to force changes in laws. And culture is the realm of discourses and practices in which ideologies are formed.

Among the *ulemas*, there has always been a suspicion regarding modern forms of cultural production and expression, which carve out spaces that engage social subjects in ways of understanding their lives and their world that are implicitly autonomous from religion. For the most part, however, whatever the *ulemas* said, artistic and cultural practices operated on a generally tolerated parallel social track, even if certain activities (modern art and painting, for example) were relatively Westernized and consumed mainly in "effendi" (Westernized bourgeois) ghettos.

Underlying this wary tolerance was a theological mode of thought (*kalam*) in which religion encompasses more than *sharia* and accommodates a certain pluralist notion of society as a vast ensemble where culture develops alongside religion. In this conception, a wide array of literary and artistic activity that is casually profane (poetry, calligraphy, plastic arts, music) can be understood as being in continuity with religion, even if certain exemplars are also understood as being on the fringe of propriety. In this way, the widest range of diversity and the most advanced forms of creativity have remained an integral and treasured part of our history.

Indeed, part of the grandeur of Islam was its ability to absorb a myriad of cultural influences. The Muslim world protected, studied, and developed the great traditions of classical literature and philosophy. It was not a place for burning books but for building libraries to preserve them. It was, for some time, the guardian of the founding documents of what became known as "Western civilization." It understood that these were, in fact, a part of the intellectual legacy of all mankind. This capacity for intellectual openness and engagement is one of the most treasured aspects of our history and legacy.

With the rise of Islamist movements, however, a new public norm had taken root. This norm is often characterized as "*salafist*," since it is based on a narrow version of a "return" to religious orthodoxy that the word has come to imply. This new salafist social norm is, for the most part, implicit, an unofficial ethos or ideology, only rarely enforced by legal or administrative sanction, but it is no less -- in fact, it is even *more* -- powerful as a result. The authority and centrality of this new public religious norm derives not from the power of a regime, but from the fact that an unapologetic Islam, vaguely salafist, has installed itself at the

heart of Arab identity; it has become the central signifier of resistance to Westernization and neo-colonialism, creating a more-Muslim-than-thou discursive context.

In earlier decades, a triumphant Arab nationalism fought off any such overbearing religiosity; today, "moderate," secular voices refrain from challenging it. They are caught in an identity trap, constantly limiting their discourse, in fear of being accused by religious conservatives or regimes of undermining Arab authenticity and independence -- even Arab nationalism itself.

We saw an example of this last year, when a group of young Moroccans decided to break the Ramadan fast with a picnic in a public park. Along with the predictable reactions from the religious sectors, the USFP (the Moroccan social democrat party), including members of its youth branch, joined in demanding punishment for the fast breakers. This "left" obeisance to a religious norm was couched in nationalist terms -- the picnickers' act was denounced as an insult to Moroccan national culture and a disruption of the ideological consensus regarding Moroccan identity. The government ended up charging the youth under an ostensibly secular statute, in a way that had never been done before, for an offense against "public order." This simple, direct challenge to the salafist public norm turned out to be too radical for everyone in the political class.

The public space, then, is increasingly dominated by a cultural norm based on elaborating a set of strict rules, a series of do's and don'ts, read off from a strict construction of religious texts. As religion is becoming a more dominant element of public ideology, it is itself contracting around salafism, creating a normative context in which the cultural is now more easily characterized to, and perceived by, believers as no longer just profane, but pagan. A capacious understanding of Islam as a partner with culture has been shrunk into a narrow version of *sharia* that excludes the cultural. The passages between the sacred spaces of religion and the casually secular discourses of profane culture, elaborate and delicate bridges that have been part of Islamic societies for so long, are being rudely and insistently barricaded.

This dynamic of salafization occurs even as the population continues to live in, experience, and consume a proliferation of profane and basically secular cultural products via television, videos, the Internet, and popular literature. It is easy--too easy--to identify the "Western" and global forces driving the proliferation of secular and profane culture, and therefore to denounce it as "foreign," but this would be to ignore the creativity and ingenuity with which Arabs have appropriated and transformed the entire gamut of contemporary means of cultural production. At the level of elite culture, there is a burgeoning patronage system for artistic modernization, financed by Western foundations and transnational NGOs -- but also by the monarchies of the Gulf. This process was accelerated by the 2003 UNDP report that cited the shortage of literary publication in the Arab world. With its focus on traditional indices, this report did not reflect the real effusion of popular cultural creativity in the Arab world, but it had the effect of encouraging transnational organizations and wealthy Arab patrons to remedy the perceived lack of literary publication and cultural production.

At the level of popular culture, of course, there is the ubiquitous dissemination of Western media conglomerates. But there is also the undeniable, and growing, presence of indigenous media outlets—from news sources like *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*, to popular soap

operas, to the popular literature of self-help and romantic advice, and through the explosion of musical and artistic creativity, which the Internet has made possible and which Arab youth have seized upon enthusiastically. At the limit, it is, inevitably, in the Arab world as everywhere else, a prodigious cultural mashup, the commercialized version of which is the "festivalization" of modern Arabic culture -- a phenomenon in which Arab businesses, promoters and middlemen are entirely complicit.

Most of these cultural practices are without religious content or intent, are thoroughly saturated with global -- not just "Western" -- influences, and are, for all intents and purposes, completely secular. Despite the growth of political Islam, attempts to Islamicize art and culture in the Arab world have been relatively weak and ineffective. Still, caught between the pressure for modernization from the secularized global culture, and the pressure for solidarity and authenticity from the salafized indigenous public norm, artists and cultural producers in the Arab world have taken to favor calling themselves "Muslim" (but not "Islamic"), even while their artistic practice has nothing to do with religion, and may be implicitly contributing to the secularization of Arab societies. By calling themselves "Muslim," they are affirming an identity, not a religious practice, but they are also making this affirmation in a discourse that avoids challenging the salafist norm and avoids identifying themselves as secular, or even "not-practicing."

What is occurring in the Arab and Muslim world, then, is a kind of schizophrenic lived experience: in private, one regularly consumes the culturally profane -- via television, videos, the Internet, and popular literature, or in carefully segmented and reserved semi-public spaces; at the same time, in public, one is careful to proclaim one's Muslim identity, avoids going to a movie theater, and perhaps makes a show of religiosity by attending the mosque, sporting a beard, or wearing the veil. The two forms of cultural experience unfold in parallel, kept at a safe and discreet distance from each other. Importantly, however, it is the religious norm that maintains hegemony in the public space, while profane cultural consumption remains private - in the closet, as it were -- with all the lesser legitimacy that implies. In the Arab and Muslim world today, cultural practices produce, and cultural subjects live in, a process of secularization, but no one is allowed to acknowledge or accept it.

It would be a mistake to see this problem simply as an expression of the social division between elites and masses. It is true that, well into the 20th century, there was a simple working compromise: Westernized elites could traffic with profane culture while ordinary people stayed in the traditional cultural sphere dominated by Islam. This traditional socio-cultural divergence is by no means entirely irrelevant. But, over the last few decades, education, literacy, and the exponential growth of the means of communication -- including television and the Internet -- brought profound changes. Contact with other languages and cultures spread beyond the elite.

Today, we have an increasingly diverse set of cultural practices throughout the Arab world. Arab youth read novels, watch movies and videos, listen to music, read blogs -- and *create* all of these things -- in many different languages. They are not just consuming, but mastering, modern cultural practices that are irreversibly influenced by, and inextricably intertwined with, linguistic and cultural influences from the East, North, South -- and, yes, the West. To pretend that this is not so, to believe that it could not be so, or to insist that it should not be so, would be folly. It is time to recognize that the days of linguistic and cultural "purity,"

which never were, will never be. And it is time to recognize the severe shortcomings of any paradigm, whether nationalist or religious, that posits such "purity" as possible and necessary.

At the same time, it would be naive to presume that this diversification of mass culture will inevitably feed into movements for secularization or democratization. While there may be an implicit secular and democratic dynamic in this growth of mass culture, on an explicitly political level, it has often been conjoined with a consensual identity politics that includes the resurgent religious public norm. The mechanism for managing this phenomenon of cultural empowerment combined with cultural confusion is not censorship, but segmentation. This includes, to be sure, the segmentation of society into isolated cultural sectors, but also -- what is perhaps more important -- the segmentation of cultural practices within the same person: the cultural subject who reads romance novels or astrology books on one day, and then reads mass-produced religious tracts, bought in the same bookstore, the next day, or watches *Ikraa* at lunch and *Rotana* after dinner.

Thus, the extension of mass, profane cultural production and consumption unfolds in parallel, within the individual, as well as in society, with the propagation of the salafist public norm, which has adapted well to the new means of mass cultural diffusion. Paperback devotional and inspirational tracts and Internet blogs replace theological texts, and a kind of collective auto-didacticism reinforces social and cultural segmentation and alienation from elitist "intellectualism."

What is important for the salafists, as for the regimes, is that mass profane cultural consumption is lived by social subjects as a distraction—something that is understood as not entirely respectable, and which has no implications for a project of social or political change. What is important is that one shows respect for the salafist norm, even if one does not practice it. Indeed, the regular, inevitable, personal trivial transgressions of the norm, with accompanying *frissons* of slightly shameful pleasure (understood as diversionary, unserious "entertainments") only reinforce the social respectability and importance of the public norm itself.

One may even see the salafist norm directly intruding in more profane forms of mass culture. It might appear, for example, in a moralizing overlay within a television show that is really a story of romance or adventure. This is particularly evident during Ramadan, a favorite time for presenting historical mini-series with an Islamic background. A similar kind of superficial Islamicization can be found in the growing genre of "self-help" and personal development literature in which a nod to the power of prayer or devotional ritual is often folded into an individualist, escapist, if not hedonistic, program of personal improvement.

All this contributes to making an ill-defined salafism the reigning explicit norm of the common public sphere, while leaving open the possibility of multiple and complex forms of cultural consumption on an individual and private level. Transgression is individual; the public norm is salafist. This is a form of ideological "soft" power that is far more effective than any bureaucratically-enforced censorship.

This schizophrenia can also be found in the attitude toward language, the fundament of culture. Historically, the ulemas have always understood the written work of the scholar as of the highest intellectual and social importance. The ironic consequence today is a constriction of

Arab writing. An Arab intellectual does not write in the language he or she speaks. On this point, pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism converge. Both insist that classical Arabic, the language of the Koran (*fosha*), is the only legitimate language for cultural expression. For pan-Arabists, *fosha* is the glue of the Arab nation, for Islamists, of the *ummah*. This ignores, of course, the profound divergences between actual usage, and even modern standard Arabic—the language of journalism, television, academic discourse, and popular and "artistic" fiction – and the *fosha*, which is rarely used outside of religious schools. This paradigm also makes the novel a particularly suspicious genre, since it explores the "existential" questions of life and its meaning in ways that are doubly transgressive; the novel is not only relatively autonomous from religion, it also reinvents the Arabic language far beyond the putative limits of *fosha*.

This is another expression of the salafist public norm: just as one cannot question salafism as a public religious norm, one cannot question *fosha* as the public norm of the modern Arabic language. One can tolerate the multitude of transgressions in linguistic practice that are inevitable in real social cultural life, but one can never recognize them, within the crucially important written space, as constituting a new legitimate norm or sets of norms. Although everyone knows that strict adherence to an ancient univocal linguistic norm is impossible, everyone must nonetheless pretend that it is and refer to it as an ideal we should strive for. Thus, we have a situation where a multitude of dialects are in use throughout the Arab world, but are never recognized, respected, or codified *in Arabic*. In fact, the grammars of these modern Arabic dialects are always published *in other languages*. One could hardly imagine a more extreme example of how a religious norm can hobble our language -- preventing it from understanding itself, and modern Arabic culture as a whole.

A similar ambivalence, not to say duplicity, reigns in the law. Each Arab state has its own legal code, but almost all refer to *sharia* as the ultimate source of law. Each state defines its own version of legality and "Islamicity," and does so for the most part, in fact, by incorporating some modern secular principles of rights and justice, but none can explicitly refuse to acknowledge the primacy of *sharia*. This ubiquitous, obligatory primacy of the Islamic norm marks the impassable horizon of the Arab polity at the moment. Once again, however, this norm can easily become more of a trademark element of an identity paradigm than a rigid religious prescription. It maintains itself as the public standard of judgment but does not always define or determine the real practices of courts and the law.

To be sure, the regimes in place have found many ways to profit from this increasing salafization of the public norm. This is true even, and perhaps especially, if the regime itself is not identified as the bearer or enforcer of an "Islamist" project. An authoritarian regime finds numerous ways to insert itself into the social and cultural tensions that arise from such a situation, taking a leading role as mediator and consensus-maker in a way that steers conflicted and potentially contestatory discourses and practices on all sides in a non-threatening direction.

In accepting the salafization of public norms related to everyday mores and behaviors (requiring or encouraging the veil, suppressing the cinema, etc.), the modern authoritarian state can renew its alliance with the ulemas - the official, state-sanctioned guardians of Islam, who are more interested in exchanging favors with regimes than reforming them. It can tolerate, while officially keeping at arm's length, politically "quietest" Islamist currents whose program of *sharia* consists mainly of mobilizing religious ideologues -- not agents of the state -- to

obsessively police piety within local communities. A regime only has to act against a few of the most shocking *sharia* penalties (e.g., stoning of women who have been raped), while leaving unchallenged the ultimate primacy of salafism as a public norm, to appear to indigenous moderates and West observers as the only rampart against complete Islamicization.

On the other hand, many of the secular intellectuals who would otherwise pursue democratic reforms often end up relying on protection of the authoritarian state against the *ulemas* or the fundamentalists, and find themselves having to defend it in return. To them, the state can sell itself as the lesser evil to Islamism, protecting some present spaces of cultural autonomy while preserving the possibility of future liberalization. We saw, for example, the reluctant support many secular intellectuals gave to the Algerian state during its struggle against the Islamists in the 90's, while today, in Egypt, the writer Sayyid al-Qemni has been protected by the State after a fatwa was launched against him. Meanwhile, the rural and socially-conservative populace, which fears the intrusion of Western mores, finds these kinds of tensions and *détentes* between the regimes and Westernized elites distant from their concerns.

Though neither party likes to acknowledge it, the state can even enter into implicit covenants with some rhetorically militant, but actually quietist, Islamist currents, who are not going to be as politically threatening as salafists of the Muslim Brotherhood stripe. The state may go as far as to grant such groups fairly stable minority status within the electoral system, as part of the tolerated opposition. This enables the regime, with renewed consent, to crack down more harshly on those politically militant Islamists and other dissidents who are seriously contesting state power.

The net result, in the midst of all the cultural confusion, is that the regimes reap the political profit from maintaining a precarious equilibrium among these contending social actors. The state has re-contractualized its relation to the various social forces: it has freed itself from too much insistence on democratization, and freed itself to maintain a program of harsh, but now more finely targeted, repression -- all while reinforcing the fundamentally undemocratic notion that the *salafist* public norm is beyond debate.

Among cultural intellectuals, this frustrating situation can produce various forms of politically debilitating withdrawal. On the one hand, there is a phenomenon of real and virtual "brain drain." Many Arab artists and intellectuals live and work, or direct their intellectual energies, outside of their home countries. They might, for example, identify themselves as "Arab" and "Muslim," rather than Egyptian or Tunisian, in the process asserting an identity whose founding elements are very close to those of salafism: the Arabic language is *fosha* and to be Arab is inseparable from being "Muslim." Intellectuals in geographic or ideological diaspora lose touch with their specific national and social base and become generic "Arab" intellectuals. Again, it is to the benefit of authoritarian regimes that such an identity can make intellectuals more comfortable with an abstract unanimity regarding global issues like Palestine and Iraq, and less engaged with local political tensions.

The intellectual withdrawal from complex and divisive local struggles to the abstract unity of a virtual international community is exacerbated by the fact that cultural intellectuals are often poorly supported by the national economy. State support of artists and cultural workers is in free fall, while alternative means of professionalization have not been well developed: many

authors and publishers, for example, have little experience with the new, competitive paradigm of international copyright conventions, contract laws, and marketing. The lack of a supportive public policy has led to a cultural milieu which is individualistic, depoliticized, and forces cultural producers to seek foreign audiences and sources of support. This external patronage has been forthcoming from Western organizations like the Ford foundation, as well as the philanthropy of Gulf princes. As a result, we now see an increasing number of cultural artifacts, representing precisely an abstract "Arab/Muslim" identity, being produced for, and appearing in, Western galleries and Gulf showcases. In the realm of fiction alone, for example, we now have multiple competitions for the best examples of "Arab" culture: the Emirates Foundation International Prize for Arabic Fiction (known as the "Arabic Booker"), the Blue Metropolis Al Majidi Ibn Dhaher Arab Literary Prize (Lebanon), and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (managed with Booker Foundation in London).

We can all recognize that artists and cultural producers in the Arab world have every right to accept the support they need from various indigenous and external sources. And there is certainly nothing wrong, and much progressive potential, in artists in our region being more thoroughly integrated into cultural developments throughout the world. The troubling implication here is that, as the status of the "Arab" artist is elevated among international audiences, he or she can become more disconnected from, and less valuable to, a national populace.

The internet has certainly fostered new spaces of cultural production and consumption that have interesting political potential. But while the internet can contribute to the growth and tactical efficacy of a politicized protest movement that already exists, and is well-rooted in its social base, it does not in itself create politicization. As we have seen in Egypt and Iran, it is a new tool that can be effective in mobilizing, but it cannot substitute for the kind of ground-level organizing in local communities that sustains a persistent and seriously challenging movement. We should also be well aware that old regimes, too, can learn new e-tricks: after the famous "Facebook protest" in Egypt, the security services used the electronic networking trail to track down and arrest protesters and organizers. As convenient as they are for organizing flash mobs, it would be naïve not to recognize that video-upload and social networking sites are also ideal tools of state surveillance.

We cannot forget, too, that *jihadis* are among the most inventive and effective users of this new cultural medium as a tool of organizing and propaganda. Their salafism has no problem with the *technological* aspects of modern culture -- a function, perhaps, of their distinction between the praiseworthy "thinker" (*moufakir*) versus the reviled "intellectual" (*mouhakka*).

It can be argued, in fact, that while internet culture encourages the formation of the wider and stronger discourse of community—a potentially powerful political phenomenon, to be sure—it also contributes to isolation and segmentation. Internet users tend to form discrete pools of social subjects who communicate exclusively -- and often anonymously -- through their screens, continually reinforcing a closed socio-political discursive loop. Within each of these closed loops the preferred mode of discourse becomes permanent irony directed at all the others. Anonymity allows dissenters to ratchet up their radicality, while avoiding open confrontation and escaping any harsh consequences. Using the internet, it is easy to mock power, while avoiding the real-world organizing that would be necessary to challenge or seize it.

Too often, then, artists and intellectuals achieve their independence apart from the national public sphere. And, even when they completely eschew religion, contemporary artistic practices do not necessarily become part of a secularizing movement. Artists and intellectuals do not, as they once did (and still do, in places like Iran and Turkey), form an avant-garde within a movement spearheading social and political as well as cultural changes. They become, rather, a kind of "court" faction, working in spaces protected and tolerated by the state or by powerful and wealthy patrons, both international and indigenous. The figure of the artist with a contestatory message, like Sonallah Ibrahim or Nas El Ghiouan in a previous generation, has largely disappeared. For example, the avant-garde Egyptian painter, Farouk Hosni, is presently minister of culture under President Mubarak. In Syria, in 2008, Hannane Kessab Hassan, translator of often licentious Jean Genêt, was chosen by the Prime Minister of Syria to direct the UNESCO-sponsored program on "Damascus, Arab Capital of Culture." Artists like Wael Chawqi (featured in the Alexandria Biennial) and Hala al-Koussy (winner of the Abraaj Capital Prize from the Gulf), however modern their ideas on culture and society, are not engaged in political contestation.

Thus, there is a confluence of new cultural forces that, on the one hand, form an implicit dynamic of secularization and democratization, and, on the other, have the immediate effect of further compartmentalizing society. Societies become divided into multiple segments, each of which has greater access to potentially progressive cultural influences. At the same time, each of the segments becomes reinforced in its particular sub-identity, and it becomes hard for them to coalesce into something "social," in the large sense of the world. Whether willingly or unwillingly, these segmented "sub-identities" prevent, rather than encourage, the effective socialization of demands for political and cultural reform. They perpetuate the divide between the secular and the religious, between the enlightened artistic and the vulgar philistine, between the "in" and the "out." The artist's secularizing and democratizing potential is, in many cases, encapsulated within an escapist identity that adopts a posture of mental exile from concrete social reality.

The flip side of this segmentation is a process of internationalization, culminating in the "festivalization" of Arab culture alluded to above. This process is a commercialized, middlebrow corollary to the financing, mentioned above, for elite cultural projects that focus on Arab identity and the Arab world, while encouraging the promotion of secular, modern, Western-friendly sentiments. It is, again, not just a Western intrusion. In our globalized reality, it has been enthusiastically joined by local entrepreneurs and promoters, and has resulted, inevitably, in a proliferation of commercialized Arab-themed cultural celebrations and festivals -- some traditional, some contemporary -- that provide new outlets to artists and new vehicles for satisfying, and selling to, the cultural tastes of modernized Arab middle classes. This is also the culmination of a process in which states have "privatized" art as they have the economy, abandoning it to the care of the private sector (even while preserving the prerogative to police it). Budgets for culture are cut, with some of the funds channeled to tourism promotion, coordinated with these privately-sponsored gala that present the modern, secular, festive face of the country.

This phenomenon reaches its zenith in festivals like those of Baalbek in Lebanon and Mawazine and Fez in Morocco. They showcase a wide range of musical and artistic talent, ranging far outside any recognizable salafist norm. The Fez Festival, for example, though it bills

itself as the "sacred music of the world," highlights such un-Islamic genres as American gospel music.

No mere picnics, these elaborate celebrations are multi-day events, drawing audiences from around the world (primarily Europe and the Arab world). To some extent, then, such festivals are a means of building bridges from the sacred to the profane, but in a way that is highly commodified and controlled, and carefully prevented from leaking into the everyday cultural sphere. They are well-supported by a panoply of sponsors, from corporate (banks, airlines, hotels, media), to private (including princely and royal foundations, as well as private individuals), to governmental (especially tourism ministries). No public disorder here.

With the creation of these protected spaces of imaginary liberalization throughout the region, culture becomes here a substitute for dissent, the accomplice of a state's efforts to contain opposition and to assure stability through diversification. Culturalizing secular and democratic tendencies—a process that both segments and internationalizes progressive elements of society—brings a semblance of freedom (non-political freedom, to be sure) without putting into question the hegemony of the regime or the dominance of salafist ideology. When the audience goes home, in the everyday life of ordinary citizens, the veil drops, as the salafist norm extends its influence in the public sphere, unchallenged—and even reinforced—by traditionally progressive cultural and political currents—all to the satisfaction of the state.

To be clear, modernizing cultural movements in the Arab world have real progressive potential. Those involved in them gain a kind of symbolic transnational capital, and become global cultural actors. As such, they can either exile themselves from their society by identifying themselves as part of global culture, or of an abstract Arab cultural *ummah*, or they can try to influence the trends within their own society, using their transnational cultural capital as an asset. Most cultural actors will negotiate this tension with ambivalence, alternately emphasizing the different dimensions of their cultural personality. Regime manipulation is not perfect, and in ceding new spaces of cultural autonomy and experimentation a process is unfolding that, in the long term, could foster a new type of opposition to authoritarian rule in the Arab world.

One thing is certain, however: If artistic and intellectual practice is to have an effect on democratization, it will be necessary to engage the salafist paradigm on its home ground, and present a credible and consistent alternative. We must confront, openly and without fear, the challenge of secularism as it has developed in the non-Islamic world -- not just "the West." Of course, this is not a matter of adopting anyone else's prefabricated "model." We must first of all reconnect with the Arab and Islamic tradition that built spaces for cultural autonomy over centuries. A new cultural paradigm, a new public norm, appropriate to the contemporary world as well as our own traditions, cannot be built by ignoring the salafist paradigm on the one hand, and paying lip service to it on the other, but rather by engaging it, with respect and courage, and enabling a transition from religious closure to political openness. This will require carefully negotiating all the intricate passages of our religion and our traditions, as well as our relation to the world culture in which we are now inextricably entwined. It won't be a picnic, but we must take some bold steps to craft a new paradigm of cultural modernity that will celebrate the diversity and creativity of the Arab world.