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Purposeful Art Between Television Preachers and the State

JESSICA WINEGAR

In the early 1990s, the Egyptian government began allotting millions of pounds to art projects in the cultural sector whose goals included creating a modern national culture, uplifting Egyptians' cultural level, and countering what many officials viewed as a rising threat to state secularism coming from both Islamism and the Islamic Revival in general. In the 2000s, two popular new television preachers, Amr Khaled and Moez Masoud, began encouraging the production of *al-fann al-hadif* (purposeful art) to bring Muslims closer to God, build the ummah, raise its cultural level, and counter the threat of immorality and identity loss seen to come from globalization and secularization.¹ This coinciding interest in art as a tool to achieve certain ends suggests an overlapping of state and religious projects that warrants closer scrutiny.

On the one hand, both the preachers and some state actors are reinvigorating ideas about art from the Islamic discursive tradition, but often to different ends. On the other hand, the similarities between these two groups suggest an overlap of the civilizing impulses of both state secularism and Islam. To lay groundwork for future research in this vein, more direct attention needs to be paid to the preachers' actual lectures on art.²

Art as vital to Islam

Khaled and Masoud have been at the forefront of changing the dominant discourse on art in the Islamic Revival, which previously focused on art's negative aspects and effects. Khaled targets art as a central field for revival in his popular *Life Makers* project, begun in 2004, to spur Muslims to undertake development works to revitalize Islam and their communities. As a result, Internet "teams" have formed devoted to developing aspects of the arts in different countries. Meanwhile, Moez Masoud lectured extensively on art in his 2007 Ramadan programme *The Right Path* and is building an "Artistic Corner" on his website. Khaled and Masoud not only provide audiences with a means to reconcile religious belief with certain kinds of

art (e.g., painting, sculpture, music, film, literature); they also urge them to see art as central to their religious practice. Both start by arguing that there is no contradiction between art and Islam. Here they are addressing potential audience concerns, drawn from parts of the Islamic discursive tradition, especially as disseminated by other prominent religious figures such as the late Shaykh Shaarawi, that certain forms of art might encourage immoral behaviour, idolatry, or the vain imitation of God's creation. Yet they draw on other parts of that same tradition to do so; they argue that art constitutes a longstanding means within Islam to come closer to God and to build the ummah.

Both Khaled and Masoud tell their audiences that art is vital to Islam – not only because God's creation *is* art, but also because it is through experiencing art (an earthly reflection of God's beauty) that humans get closer to God. Khaled invokes Quranic verses and various deeds of the

For two of the most popular Egyptian television preachers, Amr Khaled and Moez Masoud, art is central to the project of Islamic Revival. For them, art is a special means of bringing people closer to God, making them more cultured, and building the ummah. The author argues that, intriguingly, their focus on art overlaps with that of the Egyptian state's nation-building and civilizing art projects.

Prophet Muhammad to show that God is the source of all art and beauty, that the Prophet valued the arts, and that the arts – including the visual image, poetry, and music – have been among the most effective tools of spreading Islam's message. This, he says, is because Islam, through the Quran, "cultivates the sense of beauty" in human hearts. Masoud makes similar points by rely-

ing on a hadith that has been used for centuries to give credence to art: "God is beautiful and loves beauty." Masoud defines art as the "ability to express a particular beauty that God makes visible in our hearts; a specific beauty that our Lord showed us and with which He has guided us." Thus, both preachers argue that because God is the original Creator of all things beautiful in the universe, and because beauty has the power to move the heart, then engaging with art not only shows appreciation for God's work, but, in Masoud's words, helps us "remember God." Art, then, is conceptually likened to dhikr, that important act of remembering God in Islam. This relationship between beauty, art, the heart, and remembrance of God has been a key element of Sufi philosophy for centuries.

Masoud also makes the very significant claim that art is a *fard* (obligation) for Muslims. In his view, to deny art is to deny God, because art is a reflection of God. Furthermore, God endowed some humans with artistic talent, and therefore to reject art-making is to deny God's gift. Not only that, he says, but artists are compelled to use that talent to remind others of God. Art is an *adah* (tool) that artists can use to move hearts in the right direction, especially in these times. Herein lies another central reason for Masoud's insistence on art that again has roots within the Islamic discursive tradition. Because art has a special capacity to enter the heart and move it, immoral things made today that "are called art" can also enter the heart and move it toward illicit *shahawat* (desires). Therefore, beautiful art is needed now to help people reject these dangerous, impostor forms of art, and to remind people of God's beauty.

State actors draw on some of the same Islamic texts as the preachers, but also highlight European Enlightenment and Nasserist/socialist discursive sources. In so doing, they seek to create different kinds of subjects and communities. The hadith quoted by Masoud has been especially favoured in modern Egyptian state contexts. For example, it is frequently used by state visual art college imams and professors trying to set concerned Muslim students at ease so that they can learn art in order to build the nation; and it is quoted by graduates and practicing artists when trying to convince religious sceptics of their artistic practice. Sufi philosophy is also the main source of Islamic inspiration for artistic practice, though there are non-religious sources which are more prominent. But in state contexts, art is only rarely presented as a way to come closer to and remember God, or to move the heart away from illicit desires. Rather, it is presented as a way to express individuality and Egyptian identity. Khaled and Masoud seek to create proper Muslim artists, while the state seeks to create secular-national artists.

Art to build community

The preachers do share with state actors the view that art is an especially helpful tool for building a cultured community. Yet although both preachers speak positively of national communities – Masoud

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argues that Muslims need not give up love for the *watan* (nation) when they come closer to God, and Khaled's *Life Makers'* projects are also oriented to fixing situations in individual countries – it is more the Islamic ummah to which they refer. Khaled develops this idea the most. He makes the significant claim that art is the most dangerous field of the twenty three he targets for *al-Nahda* (revival), but not for the commonly expected reason. Spending little time on the question of immorality, he tells them that it is “ignorant” to think that art is shameful. He then goes on at length defining culture as that related to (1) education and high/literate arts (“books, theatre, cinema, poetry, novels, museums, monuments, old manuscripts, painting, sculpture, plastic arts, acting, and songs”); and (2) “the *malami*h (defining features) of the ummah.” He links both by arguing that art is a primary means for giving the ummah defining features of quality, instead of cheap importations of western artistic features (e.g., western images in video clips, Turkish and western musical forms).

Several times he returns to his central point: the *Nahda* cannot proceed without first having art “pave the way.” In sum, if a central goal of the awakening is to build the ummah, then to succeed the ummah needs to have defining features, or art that gives the Islamic community its unique visual, aural, and literary identity. Only artists can provide this, but currently many are imitating western art. By reminding them of the potential consequences of their actions on Judgment Day, Khaled intends to draw all artists closer to Islam, as well as to implore them to use their God-given talent for a larger cause. He is also asking his audience to help him reach artists, telling them: “We will not be able to carry out the *Nahda*” without art. Similarly, Masoud makes the eradication of western imitation and building an Islamic identity one of the three core goals of his television show *The Right Path*.

The way that these preachers, especially Khaled, discuss art as a tool of progress and ummah-building bears similarities to that of Islamic scholars of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century *al-Nahda* movement (e.g., Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh). Like these scholars, the preachers seek to revitalize Islam for a modern project and rely on the Islamic discursive tradition to do so. Their ultimate goal is to create a modern and cultured Islamic ummah, filled with art-appreciating Muslims. Yet Khaled's positive reference to arts and culture in 1950s Egypt compels us to consider the influence on preachers of Nasser-era cultural development discourses, which still proliferate in the state cultural sectors today. Indeed, Khaled's emphases on building institutions of high art and culture, on combating the “ignorance” of those with low cultural levels who do not understand the benefits of art, and on preserving and defining identity in the face of western influence are exactly those emphases of state elites today, with the important exception that the main identity with which he is concerned is an Islamic one. Furthermore, when Khaled exclaims, “where are the

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could be understood as a specific attempt to counteract the Mubarak government's project to secularize society in large measure through the arts, by opening a space to define artists as “Muslim,” and culture as “Islamic,” rather than (or instead of) just “Egyptian.” On the other hand, the preachers could be understood as operating in tandem with the state's civilizing mission through art. It is clear that the preachers see a need for Islamic “high” art and culture, yet the category of art as they have defined it thus far differs little from that promoted by state programmes. Furthermore, they, like state elites, call for art at the same time that they denounce violent acts perpetrated by Muslims as “misunderstandings” of Islam. Both groups' notions of progress rest on a cultural hierarchy that privileges the styles and knowledges of their shared social backgrounds. And although the preachers seek primarily to edify the ummah, they, like the secularist state elites, also seek to correct a population considered to be largely “ignorant” of the value of art.

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museums and exhibitions of fine art and paintings?!” and then offers London's Hyde Park as an exemplar of high art for the public, he uses a rhetorical strategy that has characterized state press calls for raising the cultural level of the nation for two decades. For both preachers and state arts officials, western art and institutions are something whose level (when ethical) should be emulated in building community, but whose features should not be imitated. Yet for state actors, art must avoid western imitation in order for it to give a distinctive identity to the Egyptian nation; whereas for the preachers, art must do so in order to give defining characteristics to the ummah.

A new art and culture?

The preachers' positive approach to art should not be understood as entirely new, then, but rather as a reinvigoration of earlier Islamic discourses on art, including those from the turn-of-the-century *Nahda* movement in Egypt, and perhaps also as a recurrence of some Nasser-era developmentalist approaches to art and culture. Yet the fact that both the Egyptian government's and lay preachers' interests in the arts coincide today demands that we consider the significance of the relationship between the two. The appearance of a positive preacher focus on art some ten years after the beginning of a concerted government effort to support art and culture projects suggests some areas of influence, particularly since these preachers and their core constituency of fans are from the same urban, educated, upper middle classes as those who visit arts institutions and attend state-sponsored arts events. On the one hand, the preachers' projects

Still from a commercial for Moez Masoud's 2008 Ramadan programme

Notes

1. For more on the art and artists influenced by this phenomenon, see the articles by Patricia Kubala and Karin van Nieuwkerk in *ISIM Review*, no. 20 (Fall 2007), and Karim Tartoussieh, “Pious Stardom: Cinema and the Islamic Revival in Egypt,” *Arab Studies Journal* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 30–43.
2. For more on state arts projects as discussed here see Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).