Rarely does one get the opportunity to hear three celebrated yet highly diverse speakers interact on a subject of such immense importance as religion and modernity. This full-day conference featured lively debates from the three recipients of the 2004 Erasmus Prize, Abdukarim Soroush, Iranian historian and philosopher of science and Islamic mysticism dubbed the “Erasmus of Islam”; Sadik Al-Azm, Syrian retired professor of Modern European Philosophy and writer on Arab politics, and Fatema Mernissi, Moroccan scholar of political science and advocate of women’s rights. All three awardees, in addition to their considerable scholarly contributions, are well known for their roles as public intellectuals. Throughout the conference they ventured into the three general thematic areas: the relationship between Islam and democracy, the impact of the satellite and Internet culture on Islamic identities, and the relationship between secularization and modernity.

While their focus was to a large degree on Muslim majority societies and nation-states, they noted that Turkey was the most successful model of a secular, democratic, and “reasonably free” state in the Muslim Middle East. He further underlined that by being granted EU-membership, Turkey would have the necessary support to further develop and mature. So- roush, on the other hand, took a philosophy-centred approach to secularism through an analysis of political systems and nation-states. In his discussion of democratization in the Middle East, for example, he pointed out the need for political reform in Arab states and noted that Turkey was the most successful model of a secular, democratic, and “reasonably free” state in the Muslim Middle East. He further underlined that by being granted EU-membership, Turkey would have the necessary support to further develop and mature. Soroush, on the other hand, took a philosophy-centred approach to secularism and social change. He argued that with the demise of rational philosophy in early Islam, Islamic civilization has leaned disproportionately towards law, and has consequently lost its balance. He stressed the need for Muslims to accommodate new theories and ideas and to be flexible in their use of intellectual tools since, “tools are not holy or sacred.” Politics and philosophy respectively constituted the paths to democratic social reform.

In her exposition on the potentials of new communication technologies, Fatema Mernissi drew attention to yet other means of democrati- zation. She pointed out how Arab satellite television and the Internet are providing not only an increasingly wider platform for public de- bate, but setting higher professional standards. She also drew atten- tion to the paradox of how new media in the Arab world serve to forge an Arab identity on the one hand, yet contributes to a more universal or globalized identity on the other. The conference took an unexpected turn when Sadik Al-Azm, in the spirit of finding solutions to conflicts among Muslims, called for Sunni religious leaderships to apologize to the Shi’a for “that mother of all crimes,” the murder of the Prophet’s grandson Husayn in Karbala in year 61 (of the Muslim calendar). The distinguished Sunni discussant on his panel, Egyptian professor Nasr Hamid Abou Zayd, turned to his fellow panelist Soroush, a Shi’a, and bowed in apology as they shook hands warmly. If only past wrongs could always be put right with such gra- cious lightheartedness.