

Islamic scientific history contradicts today's extremists

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A British boy of South Asian descent, about eight or nine years old, was pressing the buttons of an interactive display at a new exhibition in London. "Yassin, Zak, come over, you ought to check this out," he called out to his classmates.

The exhibition, "1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim Heritage in Our World", was created with children in mind. The interactive displays are large and colourful with cartoon-like characters guiding visitors as they explore the history behind some of Muslims' greatest inventions.

With the support of the Saudi Arabia-based Jameel Foundation, the 1001 Inventions exhibition is being held at London's Science Museum until summer.

@body arnhem: There are displays describing well-known Islamic contributions to science in the fields of mathematics and astronomy, but there are also interesting facts about a number of unsung heroines in the field. One example is Fatima al Fihri, a 9th century Muslim woman who inherited a vast sum of money from her merchant father and spent it all on building al Qarawiyyin, a university and mosque complex that still stands in Fez, Morocco. It is considered to be the oldest university in the world, not just the Islamic world.

How ironic, I thought to myself as I stood there looking at the display honouring her contributions to religious instruction as well as political and natural sciences education. More than a millennium later some ignorant souls who claim to share her religion want to deny women an education or employment. Have these individuals even heard about Fatima al Fihri?

The truth is that secularism played a large role in the advancement of science in Islam. Because religion was seen as a tool in life – not the objective, as it is often preached today – people were free to create, imagine and dream without the imposition of artificial boundaries. Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars conducted research side by side and thus both Islam and humanity were enriched.

The movie concludes with al Jazari telling the students as they are about to leave the library: "Remember, spread the word."

No one, adolescent or adult, who has been educated about the scientific history of the Muslim world would be an easy target for the brainwashing of the doom mongers. I hope that the Jameel Foundation takes the 1001 Inventions exhibition across the world, even to Kabul, where children and adults could learn about Islam away from the indoctrination of the ignorant.

This exhibition, unlike many others, does not include priceless or rare artefacts. Instead, it is made up of panels, projection screens and child-friendly gadgets that resemble the original inventions. The show could be easily transported across the world and appeal to any child, regardless of background.

It is not only Zak, Yassin, Michael and Chelsea in Britain who need enlightening about the many contributions of Muslim scientists. Spreading the word to the forsaken children of Kabul, Baghdad and Quetta, who have a much greater need of this valuable knowledge, would arm them with moderation and protect their minds.

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The displays at 1001 Inventions very much resemble the exhibition on the ground floor of the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation, where the interactive and child-friendly displays include buttons, screens and levers. The idea is that children can combine entertainment and learning by pressing, pulling and rotating the controls to create action in the displays. It is a model quite unlike the adult-orientated, but equally fascinating, Islamic Arts Museum in Qatar.

What a powerful tool education can be, especially at such a young age. It instils pride for one's culture, and understanding and respect for others. Imagine the magnitude of the message that such an exhibition would have in countries where Islam is wrongly used to justify crimes against women, which continues to happen in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, among others.

Allowing children to see the great deeds and creations of Muslims who dared to dream denies the evil and the ignorant the opportunity to indoctrinate them.

Inside the hall in London, a teacher called upon two pupils, Michael and Chelsea, telling them to hurry up before a short film began; the story of 1001 Inventions and the Library of Secrets, starring the Oscar-award winning actor Ben Kingsley, unfolded.

After being approached by three children, the librarian, played by Kingsley, is transformed into Abu Alez al Jazari, the mathematician and inventor who is considered one of the fathers of modern mechanical engineering. The children ask him about the so-called Dark Ages, and al Jazari responds: "Never was a period of history so poorly named."

Al Jazari introduces them to characters such as Abbas Ibn Firmas, the Berber mathematician known for his early attempt at flight, and Abu al Qasim al Zahrawi, a 10th century doctor who was one of the most prominent pioneers of surgery of his time. Al Zahrawi is credited with inventing numerous surgical tools as well as using catgut sutures to stitch internal wounds, a technique used in hospitals today.

His name, I thought to myself, is eerily similar to that of another doctor, Ayman al Zawahiri. But whereas the former contributed to the advancement of humanity and saved countless lives across the centuries, the second became a cave-dwelling terrorist.