

Islam and Science

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How Islamic Scientific History Can Combat Today's Extremists



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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. – Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi *Photo: Abu al Qasim al Zahrawi*

How Islamic Scientific History Can Combat Today's Extremists By Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi

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.

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 ninth-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.

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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 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 out to 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 Firnas, the Berber mathematician known for his early attempt at flight, and Abu al Qasim al Zahrawi, a tenth-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. 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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