

Faith and science in harmony and on display in London

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Last November, the award-winning author and former US diplomat Michael Hamilton Morgan spoke lyrically in Sharjah about Arab-Muslim scientific contributions to modern progress. In a region that finds great fulfillment in studying its past, Mr Morgan's words were bound to have a magical effect on his audience.

As I wrote in *The National* at the time, I thought Mr Morgan was a fascinating character not only because of the value of his ideas about past Muslim scientific innovations, but also because of his resolve to educate a western public on what their intellectual traditions often sees as a Muslim dark age.

Last week, I was just as optimistic about enhancing the historical image of Islam in the 21st century west's world view as I toured the exhibit, "1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim Heritage in Our World", hosted by the Science Museum in London. As I toured the exhibition, I was pleased to see the dazzling inventions winning the admiration of journalists, schoolchildren, students, tourists, and government officials.

Featuring a range of exhibits, interactive displays, and dramatisations, the exhibition shows how many modern inventions, spanning fields such as engineering, medicine and design, trace their roots to Islamic civilisation. Media commentaries have tended to view this event as a celebration of past Muslim scientific brilliance. I see it as going far beyond that. Such exchanges can help create mutual understanding between the West and the Muslim world. This understanding can create an appreciation for multiculturalism, and even advance conversations about how religion relates to science.

For many sceptics, "1001 Inventions" would seem to be too humble an initiative to make a dent in mutual Western-Muslim world misperceptions. But more than 15,000 visitors showed up at the exhibition in its first week alone. Exposing this tradition to the many in the West for whom the history of Muslim innovation is but "forgotten history" is an important sea change.

Ever since the 19th century, some European thinkers, such as Ernest Renan, have argued that science and Islam are incompatible; that the explosion of scientific translation and discovery was largely the achievement of non-Arabs; and that an increasingly strict and ossified Islam curtailed further scientific and speculative thought. Many of those myths framed Muslim history as barbaric, fanatic, inhibitive, or at its best, exotic. The power of those historically misinformed images could have never been so dominating in both the media and in educational discourse than in the years after September 11.

According to a 2003 report for the American Textbook Council, some of the most basic facts about Islam – those available to any adult reader in the standard works of Bernard Lewis – have been completely obscured from view in widely-used textbooks. Many materials finding their way into classrooms offer little recognition for Muslim scientific and intellectual traditions. Brilliant contributions by innovators like Al Bairoani, Ibn Sina, Al Khawarezmi, and Ibn Al Haitham were terribly overshadowed by exotic myths trickling down from One Thousand and One Nights and sensual literary narratives.

Within western societies, 1001 Inventions would certainly boost emerging multicultural understandings. An appreciation for the contributions to modern civilisation of Muslim scientists would provide Muslim communities in Europe and the West in general with a sense of pride in and attachment to their cultural roots. At the same time, a study of these pioneers of scientific innovation could also humanise Muslim history in western minds, something that could eventually promote a better understanding for Muslims' cultural concerns as they seek smoother integration into western communities.

The fact that a culture of scientific and intellectual innovation was initiated and encouraged by a religious society may appear intriguing for those who have described Islam, and religious faith in general, as antithetical to scientific inquiry. But once we know how Islamic traditions encouraged scientists to observe the natural world and make sense of it, we would realise the constructive role of religion as a driver of scientific development.

It is ironic that the Manchester-based Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation (FSTC) has recently distributed free books to UK schools to highlight the scientific innovations of Muslim civilisation at a time when the atheist and activist Richard Dawkins was announcing his plans to deliver free DVDs on what he describes as the incompatibility of science and religion to UK educational institutions. The success of "1001 Inventions" should foster an understanding of religion as a catalyst rather than a hindrance to scientific creativity.

We should not overestimate the 1001 Inventions short-term contributions to advancing Muslims' struggle to win recognition for their "forgotten history". Still, with the support of intellectuals like Michael Morgan and Salim Hassani, the director of 1001 Inventions, institutions like the Science Museum and the Muslim Heritage Foundation, the realisation of that goal is ever closer.

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