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Mon. Dec. 14, 2009

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1001 Inventions by Muslims Awarded

By Arwa Aburawa

A Muslim scientist who helped chart the lost innovations of Islam in the book "1001 Inventions: Muslim Heritage in Our World", has recently been granted a fellowship by the British Science Association for his efforts.

Over the last two decades, Professor Salim Al-Hassani has helped reclaim Islamic scientific, artistic and technological advances which have been marginalized or simply forgotten in a world focused on Western advancements.



Salim Al-Hassani on receiving his honorary degree.

Professor Al-Hassani told IslamOnline.net that "the 1001 Inventions project is about the history of science and focuses upon the thousand year period from the 7th century onwards that is currently under-appreciated by many around the world."

In fact, the period between the 7th and 17th centuries has been labeled as the 'Dark Ages' in the West despite the exceptional scientific advances in the Muslim world.

Science and the 'Co-operation of Civilizations'

In a post-9/11 world, where everyone seems to point to a 'clash of civilizations' there is clearly a need for more cultural understanding and respect for the Islamic world and Al-Hassani maintains that science can play a significant role in this.

"By showing the common scientific and cultural heritage of the world's different societies, we can give people a new found respect for the different cultures of the world," he said.

"This also helps to overcome short-sighted misconceptions about cultural superiority, and helps the world appreciate and respect the beliefs, lifestyles and history of their fellow man."

He went on to say that he hopes "this will reduce extremist ideas, cement social cohesion and empower young people to consider careers in science and technology."

The professor was also keen to point out that the '1001 inventions' book does not focus entirely on Muslim scientific achievement but rather shows that it was the contribution of many different cultures that had helped create the modern era.

"The achievements of the Muslim world were built upon the knowledge they

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received from other civilizations: the Greeks, Babylonians, Assyrians, Chinese and Indians," the professor explained.

"And the Renaissance that took place in Western Europe was only possible thanks to the huge influence that the Muslim civilization (among others) had on European thinkers, scholars and scientists."

Muslim Women Scientists

As such we owe our modern day scientific achievements to many civilizations, as developments have built on the work of various scientist from different times, including many female scientists from the Muslim world.

It is believed that female mathematicians, engineers, medics and administrators played a significant role in Muslim scientific advances. Lack of research, however, has hindered the level of information we have about these women.

"There is more of this story than we currently know. Unfortunately, there are still 5 million manuscripts still awaiting review so that we can discover this missing history," said Al-Hassani, explaining that only 50,000 manuscripts have been reviewed and studied so far.

Despite this missing history on Muslimah scientists, an abundance of information illustrates the role that the Muslim civilization played in the scientific, technological and cultural heritage of the modern world.

On a personal level, the professor states that he believes that one of the most important things invented by Muslims during this period is the Catgut (a cord used for stitches), without which no internal surgery could be carried out with ease and safety.

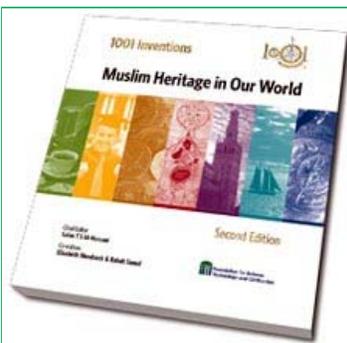
"Abul Qassim Al-Zahrawi first used catgut on pregnant women in labor to stitch their womb during caesarean operations. The catgut will dissolve in the body in three weeks and patients wouldn't need to go through an open surgery again to remove the inner stitch."

"It is still used a thousand years later and I thank Al-Zahrawi personally because had it not been for his pioneering of catgut, I would not have had heart surgery," exclaimed Al-Hassani.

Science versus Religion?

The Foundation for Science Technology and Civilisation (FSTC), which is the educational foundation behind the '1001 inventions' book, recently distributed 3,000 free copies to UK schools and plans to distribute 90,000 copies of the book to US schools in the next 12 months.

This move has been interpreted as a direct reaction to Atheist Richard Dawkin'- of the book *The God Delusion*- who distributed free DVD's of his work to UK schools in celebration of Darwin's 200th anniversary. Whilst dismissing that they were solely motivated by Dawkins, the FSTC did admit that they hoped to "encourage debate about the relationship between science, faith and culture."



"The Renaissance that took place in Western Europe was only possible thanks to the huge influence that the Muslim civilization (among others) had on European thinkers, scholars and scientists."

They also add that the work of evolutionary biologist Dawkins with the support of the British Humanist Association has pitted science and religion against each other. "The 1001 Inventions project reminds us that for 1,000 years the religious and the scientific were comfortable bedfellows and led to unprecedented openness to new ideas and social change," the FSTC said.

Al-Hassani also remarked that, "Whilst the Dawkins DVD teaches young people about 'the experimental scientific method', it fails to point out that it was pioneered by a religious physicist called Ibn-Al Haytham, who saw no conflict in being both a Muslim and a scientist."

World-wide Audience

To continue their educational work, 1001 Inventions will be launching a brand new and interactive exhibition at the Science Museum in London in early 2010. This will be the first of a four year tour which will see the exhibition displayed across the world's major cities, with North America as the first destination on the global schedule.

Taking his message to a world-wide audience, Al Hassani remarks that, "Science crosses all cultural and religious boundaries and researching the roots of modern science has highlighted to me the great debt we all owe to people of many creeds and colors."

Arwa Aburawa is a UK-based freelance journalist specializing in Palestine, the environment, local politics and arts & culture.

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