

Islam Encourages Scientific Progress

The word Islam conjures up a disturbing picture in the minds of some people outside the Muslim world. It is a fact that many in the West imagine Islam to be a faith far removed from modern life, closed to science and that attaches no value to a good quality of life. The first reason for this erroneous belief is that various people who claim to be Muslims in fact have views and lifestyles that fly in the face of it. However, someone looking in from the outside cannot recognize that and will be unable to evaluate matters accurately. Another important reason is associated with the first: Most people are unacquainted with the truths of Islam and the correct interpretation of the Quran. In point of fact, these people who make incorrect evaluations are not only from outside the Islamic world; many people within the Islamic world as well are unable to properly understand the Quran. The reason for the appearance of mistaken and radical views is that the Quran is not correctly understood.

The only point of reference to truly learn about Islam is the Quran but we see that some people do not interpret the Quran correctly and produce their own perverse and foolish deductions from it in order to support their own misguided and superstitious beliefs. One of the subjects most easily capable of being misinterpreted in this way is science and scientific activity.

Science is an important reality that enables us to know the universe we inhabit, the Earth and our own bodies and to be able to appreciate all the beauties around us. Scientific advances have enlightened human life and opened the door to a healthier way of living. For example, by means of medical advances the average human life span today is much greater than it was a century ago. Even in the 1950s, average worldwide life expectancy was 47, whereas according to U.N. figures it had risen to 68 by 2010. Similarly, advances in other branches of science have made our lives easier and more comfortable.

Today, for instance, the benefits of the Internet are obvious. By means of the Internet we can learn at once what is happening in different parts of the world. Communications among people have grown and become far easier. New concepts such as e-commerce have bestowed a new dimension to our understanding of economics. Information about a subject one wants to investigate can now be accessed immediately. The Internet is just one of the benefits that science has bestowed on mankind over the last century and those nations making greater uses of the benefits of science now live at a much more advanced level. Had science not progressed as much as it has, we would very likely still be living dark and backward lives devoid of many facilities.

For a sincere Muslim, science is a blessing that God has bestowed on mankind. Islam advocates a rational approach. In many verses of the Quran, God advises people to use their intelligence. He emphasizes the need for us to think rationally and scientifically, speaking of, "...those deeply rooted in knowledge..." and "...only people of intelligence pay heed." (3:7). Another verse advises people to think about the formation of the universe: "...reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth ..." (3:191)

Use is still being made today of the work of various Muslim scientists in the past who understood that Islam encourages scientific investigation. People such as Avicenna, Farabi and Battani were among the leading scientists of the Middle Ages. Avicenna's book "The Canon of Medicine" (al-Qānūn fī al-Tibb) was used as a text book in the universities of Montpellier and Louvain until 1650.

Battani's "Zij" was regarded as a most important astronomical text, and his work inspired that of Copernicus. A crater on the moon was even named after him as a mark of respect: "Albategnius." Al-Khwarizmi's work "Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing" is regarded as the first work in which the first systematic solution of linear and quadratic equations are presented. The very term "algebra" comes from "al-jabr," one of the methods for solving quadratic equations in al-Khwarizmi's book. Many other examples of contributions to scientific progress by Muslim scientists could be given.

Today, too, there are a great many scientists, academics and intellectuals who have emerged from the Islamic world and serve all mankind. The spread of scientific thinking and concentration on rationality will further increase the numbers of such people and the contributions they make. That is why it needs to be better understood that the Quran encourages rational thinking and scientific research and activity. In this way, more enlightened people will appear from within the Islamic world and bearing in mind that societies are today in ever greater interaction with one another, such progress will clearly be of great benefit to both the Islamic world and to the world as a whole.

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