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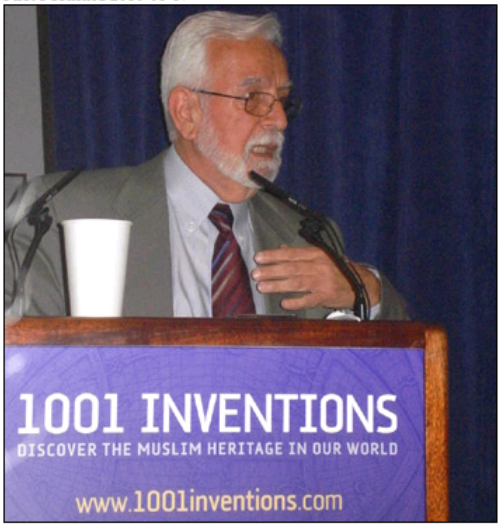

George Saliba

Influence of Arabic science on earliest Italian scientific academies

Renowned researcher: Italy's Galileo and Della Porta heavely indepted to earlier Islamic scientists.

By Mamoon Alabbasi - LONDON

The influence of Islamic science on the scientific Renaissance in Europe has been unfairly played down by many western observers, said a renowned researcher of Arabic science during a talk in London.

In a lecture entitled "Arabic Science in the Earliest Italian Scientific Academies", Professor George Saliba cited a number of examples of the significant influence of Muslim scientists on the works of Italy's Galileo and his less famous - but equally important - contemporary Della Porta.

Both Galileo and Della Porta were members of the "Accademia dei Lincei", an invaluable academy in Italy, the country that is credited with giving the first spark to the flame of the European Renaissance, according to Saliba, who is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Science in the Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University, New York.

Saliba said that Galileo in his early works had restored to using the arguments of many Arabic and Islamic scientists to make his case.

Many modern western observers wrongly limit the scope of Islamic scientists to merely passing on ancient Greek knowledge, where in truth they had built on it with their own original and pioneering additions that were vital to the development of science in Europe, stressed Saliba, who has authored a number of books on Arabic Science, including his most recent "Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance".

Saliba also noted that Muslim and Arabic commentators on Greek philosophers were wrongly thought to be mere carriers of the ancient thought, whereas in reality these commentaries contained the most original of ideas and on many occasions refuted some of the Greek reasoning.

One example cited by Saliba was Galileo's bid to disprove one theory of Aristotle, where the Italian scientist resorted to the writings and arguments of Muslim scholars - especially Averroes - to carry out the task.

Ironically, to many westerners today, Averroes is closely associated with representing the thought of Aristotle, where as the European scholars that led the way to the Renaissance were fully aware of the original contributions of Averroes and were heavily indebted to the works of many other Islamic scientists.

Even when Galileo used arguments from Copernicus to counter Aristotle, Saliba adds, these ideas themselves originated from Islamic scientists, notably Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, who wrote them some 200 years before Copernicus.

By looking at the indexes of two of Galileo's early books, Saliba points out the heavy reliance on Islamic scientific sources. Many names pop up, like Thabit and al-Battani, but perhaps most ironically is the inclusion of al-Ghazali, who is a critic of Averroes and is often presented as undermining the Greek mode of philosophy.

The indexes show that even Copernicus is a minor figure in comparison to earlier Islamic scientists. They also show that Galileo was very familiar with Avicenna's "Kitab al-Shifa" (The Book of Healing).

During the second part of his talk, Saliba drew attention to an important (though less known) Italian scientist, Della Porta, whose book on the secrets of nature was written in 1559, and translated into English in 1585 under the title "Natural Magic".

Saliba noted Della Porta, who made many references to Avicenna and Averroes, was keen to have his book translated into Arabic, which he considered the language of science at the time.

In another book of Della Porta written in 1610, Saliba added, the Italian scientist sought the help of a friend to write a short praise for the book in Arabic. The praise was put on page two to hint that the book is worthy of reading since the Arabs are praising it, noted Saliba.

The lecture was part of an international conference held at London's Science Museum, organised by the Foundation of Science, Technology and Civilisation (FSTC) to mark the international lunch of the exhibition "1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim Heritage in our World".

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