

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**

THE Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology (MIGHT) and the American University of Sharjah launched the Muslim-Science.Com Task Force on Teaching of Science in the Islamic World in May this year. The initiative is funded partly by John Templeton Foundation and the Science Education Task Force, with the partnership of MIGHT, the Islamic World Academy of Sciences and Academy of Sciences Malaysia.

The aim is "to jump start dialogue, discourse and debate on critical issues and big questions at the intersection of science and religion within the Islamic world". While Muslim-Science.Com is an online platform and portal dedicated to the revival of science and scientific culture within the Islamic World, the task force met for the first time in Kuala Lumpur for a face-to-face interaction over two days. The first day was a closed-door session for task force members, while the second was designed to be more



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Knowledge beyond the narrow construct

tative, opened to other interested parties, including members of the academe. On the second day, Professor Bruce Alberts, the former editor-in-chief of science, President Barack Obama's science envoy to the Islamic world, and a recent recipient of the US National Medal of Science, gave a keynote address.

Muslim-Science.Com founding editor and publisher Dr Athar Osman said: "There is simply no conversation or discourse on some of the most critical aspects of science and society within the Islamic world.

"Without addressing these in a critical manner, we will continue to approach

science in a piecemeal fashion without really making our mark on its development or fully benefiting from this activity."

That said, the issues surrounding science in the Islamic world — or science from the Islamic perspective, including its own worldview culture of learning and larger aspiration — is not an entirely new phenomenon. Islam has its claim to fame in advancing science as a repository of knowledge, long before it was reduced to a "technical" discipline called "modern science". Muslims then tend to be polymaths, which literally means "having learned much".

The lexicon explanation is "a person whose expertise spans a significant number of different subject areas; such a person is known to draw on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems". Psychologist Seymour

Epstein describes it as someone with the brain of scientists and the sensibilities of poets. In other words, (s)he has the positive features of both thinking styles and does not have their negative features because they are kept under control by the other thinking style.

Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519 CE) quickly comes to mind, but not personalities before him such as Al-Kindi (c. 801-873 CE), for example.

This is because is the latter is kept under the cloak of the so-called Dark Ages and therefore "modern science" takes no notice of him. Yet Al-Kindi is noted for his hundreds of original and innovative treatises on a variety of subjects ranging from metaphysics, ethics, logic and psychology, medicine, pharmacology, mathematics, astronomy and astrology to

optics, and further afield to more practical topics such as perfumes, swords, jewels, glass, dyes, zoology, tides, mirrors, meteorology and earthquakes. He is comparable to Da Vinci but in a very different way.

The world of knowledge is rapidly converging and the rigidly defined "modern sciences" are giving way to the "transdisciplinarity" in the search for more lasting global solutions. The teaching of science is also going beyond the oft-quoted acronym STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) or TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), not just in the Islamic world but also the balanced world of knowledge between for instance the old and new, traditional and modern, indigenous and contemporary, West and East, North and South, centre and periphery, and *naqli* and *aqli*.

From the Islamic viewpoint, it is about achieving the right balance of *mizan* as the new narrative moving forward. This is indeed the world that is ahead of us if there is to be hope for a new future for all humanity to live in peace.

And knowledge, beyond the current narrow construct, is no more than a means to this noble end.