

Muslim history takes spotlight at conference

About 300 turn out for talks on 1,400 years of religion's roots

By Jeffrey Weiss
Staff Writer

Dr. Basheer Ahmed wasn't sure how many people would show up on a Saturday morning for a conference with the title "Muslim Contributions to Human Civilization."

"The subject is very dry," acknowledged the chairman of the Arlington-based Muslim Community Center for Human Services.

But about 300 people made it to Midway Hills Christian Church in Dallas to hear a world-class selection of Islamic scholars.

Most of the crowd was Muslim. But many weren't. And even if the formal presentations sometimes veered to the academic, casual conversations covering 1,400 years of Muslim history, progress and conflict engaged most in attendance.

The event had an explicitly multifaith and multicultural pedigree. The main sponsor was the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, a national group. Several local Muslim organizations also sponsored the proceed-

Please see MUSLIM, 31A.



Basheer Ahmed

Continued from Page 25A.

ings. A representative of the American Jewish Congress was on the program.

Muslim-American relations are generally tied up with modern international politics. But with a few exceptions — a swipe or two at Israel, a comment about sanctions against Iraq — the bitter battles in today's world took a back seat to history Saturday.

Several speakers explained that much of what is considered Western civilization received a huge boost from Muslims. Particularly during the era of European history that scholars used to call the Dark Ages, Islamic scientists, philosophers and mathematicians were

living through a golden age of thought and progress.

A Muslim mathematician identified the use of zero by a Hindu philosopher and passed it along to Europe. A Muslim doctor invented the modern use of sutures and cauterization during surgery.

A Muslim scholar rescued the work of Aristotle and passed it along to translators who later taught Thomas Aquinas, whose Aristotle-influenced writings affected centuries of Western thought.

Dr. Almira El Azhary Sonbol, a professor at Georgetown University, seemed to draw particular attention. She spoke about the historical role of Muslim women. These days, some Muslim cultures sharp-

ly restrict the ability of women to work outside the home or receive education. Some Muslim leaders say that is in accord with religious law.

But Dr. Sonbol drew on at least 600 years of Muslim legal records to show that Muslim women in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Europe owned businesses, were trained as doctors and led trade guilds.

The rise of the male-dominated state, not any religious injunction, led to the loss of women's power in Muslim society, she said.

The idea for the conference came last year when Dr. Ahmed met in Dallas with a couple of friends who are Muslim scholars. They discussed the ignorance that most Americans — non-Muslims

and Muslims — have about Islamic history. And they came up with the conference as a way to help get the word out.

They approached the Rev. Tom Plumbley, pastor at Midway Hills, and asked whether he would be the host of the event. His congregation had a couple of questions.

"One was a concern that it not be evangelistic," and try to convert people to Islam, he said. "The other question was why they wanted to have it here rather than one of their own buildings."

Conversions weren't on the program, Dr. Ahmed said. As for the location, the idea was to find a place that more non-Muslims would be comfortable visiting than a mosque.

Muslim history takes spotlight

Arlington Star-Telegram

FRIDAY, JUNE 22, 2001

Event to spotlight Muslims' history

By PATRICK MCGEE
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

In psychiatrist Basheer Ahmed's study hangs a colorful illustration of a man in Middle Eastern garb with writing materials in his lap. Ahmed is happy to tell visitors that the man in the picture, Avicenna, penned *The Canon of Medicine*, the medical textbook used in Europe for hundreds of years.

Ahmed, who practices in Tarrant County, said the 11th century Islamic scholar is an example of how Muslims kept the torch of civilization burning during Europe's Dark Ages.

The theme will be explored at "Muslim Contributions to Human Civilization," a conference scheduled for Saturday in Dallas organized by Ahmed and other Arlington Muslim leaders.

The conference features professors from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge, Mass.; Tufts University, in Medford, Mass.; and Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C. It is an effort to educate people about Muslims' contributions to society — and to battle negative stereotypes of Muslims, orga-

If you go

The conference "Muslim Contributions to Human Civilization" is scheduled for 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturday at Midway Hill Christian Church, 11001 Midway Road in Dallas. Registration fees are \$15 for adults and \$10 for students. For more information, call (817) 572-4981.

nizers said.

"Islam is a progressive religion that helped build the modern society, but the only thing people know is Palestinians bomb this and bomb that," Ahmed said.

Stereotyping hit the Arlington Muslim community hard last month when Wadih el Hage, an Arlington resident who attended the city's central mosque, was convicted of conspiracy in the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa.

Local Muslim leaders say that Muslims overwhelmingly are peaceful, and they said they hope Saturday's conference will help portray them as contributing members of society.

"We would like to overcome this stereotype that the Muslims and the Arabs are just for violence," said Syed Ahsani,

a former Pakistani ambassador who helped organize the conference.

The conference will include panel discussions on Muslims' contributions to philosophy and civic society; Islamic political, judicial and economic systems; and Muslims' contributions to science and architecture.

"Muslims contributed to knowledge and learning for several centuries," Ahsani said. "Western knowledge is the heritage of the Muslims."

Muslims provided many early important contributions to algebra, translated ancient Greek and Indian texts and introduced the Chinese invention of paper to Europe, Ahsani said.

Steven Reinhardt, an associate professor of European history who teaches a history of civilization course at the University of Texas at Arlington, said the West is indebted to Muslims.

"We would be farther behind than we are now," Reinhardt said. "So in a sense we owe a great deal to the Muslims for not just preserving but advancing knowledge."

Patrick McGee, (817) 548-5476
pmcgee@star-telegram.com