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IF YOU GO DOWN TO  
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Ambassador of Culture

# Khalil

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# The Ambassador of Culture

Professor Nasser David Khalili is custodian of the world's largest private collection of Islamic art. In November 2005 he launched a lavishly illustrated book of Islamic art and architecture. In a rare interview he spoke to *Mahmud Al-Rashid* about his motivation and his desire to bring harmony between people through the beauty of Islamic culture.

Photography: *Steven Lawson*

“**T**ruly, God is Beautiful and loves all Beauty.” With these words (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad, Nasser Khalili ended his speech to the distinguished gathering at the launch of his book on 24<sup>th</sup> November. The ceremony was opened by Lord Bhatia and concluded with a speech from the Iranian Ambassador. The setting was the suitably splendid Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, London. The book – *The Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture*, 186 pages containing 800 sumptuous illustrations, is equally splendid in its appearance and coverage of the subject matter.

Later, at his impressive offices in Mayfair, I ask the significance to him of the hadith he had quoted on that day. “Beauty is universally appreciated and unanimously longed for. No one, of whatever colour, race or religion rejects beauty; it is truly a common denominator that can bring everyone together. That hadith inspires my work: I collect beautiful items and put them on display so that people of all background can gather and together enjoy the beauty in front of them.”

The idea for the book has been with Khalili for a long time, but what led him to actually start compiling it three years ago was the demand from people wherever he went to have in an illustrated volume with historical notes of the various themes of his lectures. “We were fortunate that about 90% of the items featured were already in our collection. Nevertheless, putting the book together was an eye-opener even for me. Muslims have made a massive contribution to world civilisation and this fact has been



largely ignored in the West. Whilst the Europeans were living in the Dark Ages, the Muslim scientists were riding high. I believe this book will instil pride and dignity in Muslims for their rich and great culture."

So why is he, a Jewish man, interested in uplifting the Muslims? His answer is immediate and he offers three powerful reasons. "Firstly, we are cousins. We share the same Prophet in Abraham. The languages of Hebrew and Arabic both have a common origin in Amharic. Our religions have so much in common. So, I have no hesitation in promoting my close relative. Secondly, as a person of religion, I know that God commands we respect each other. All humans are the children of Adam and Eve. There is no reason why we should not get on with each other, and where there are problems we have to try and resolve them – and I prefer to do this through art and culture, which have a universal and therefore unifying language. Thirdly, great art, great poetry, the sciences, the great mathematicians, astronomers, they belong to all of us, not just one group of people. Their legacy is to all humanity."

All the more wonder why Muslims themselves have not taken a greater interest in the collection of Islamic art. "Yes," Khalili agrees, "only a few Muslim leaders understood and took to heart the fact that culture can enhance young generations; give them confidence, strength and an inspiring vision for the future. Maybe it's because when something is too close to your own eyes you do not see it," he says charitably, "or perhaps they have been preoccupied with other matters. But I do hope Muslims will embrace their culture more and appreciate and promote it. When you see what your ancestors have achieved, you have pride, dignity and a reason to leave your own legacy to mankind. And if I have played a part in generating an interest in that ocean of Islamic beauty, then I am only grateful for the opportunity."

*Islamic Art and Architecture* is printed in English, Dutch and Arabic with plans for about 25 other languages. The reaction so far has been overwhelming, with Khalili's Muslim friends expressing deep gratitude and his Jewish friends expressing great pride at such a publication. Khalili believes the book could play an instrumental part in bringing Jews and Muslims closer together. He is negotiating with the government for many of the major schools to be given a copy.

The Khalili Collection of Islamic art consists of more than

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Above: Khalili in his central London office.

Left: Holding the book he wrote at 14.

20,000 items from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It includes priceless copies of the Qur'an, religious manuscripts, miniature paintings, calligraphy, ceramics, jewellery, coins, scientific instruments and much more. The collection has been published in 27 richly illustrated volumes. The first four volumes are on the Qur'an. The fifth one is on calligraphy from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There's one on the Arts of War and another on Gems of Mughal India.

Khalili was born in Isfahan on 18th December 1945. The Persian Jews are one of the oldest communities having been brought in by Cyrus the Great after his conquest of Babylon. When Khalili was only seven months old the family moved to Tehran. He remained there until 1967 when he moved to New York and then to London where he married Marion with whom he has three sons, Daniel, Benjamin and Raphael. In Tehran, he went to a Jewish school and recalls being told by his Muslim teacher that he would never become anything in life; that he would be a liability. That merely spurred him on to prove otherwise and by the age of 14 he had written a book on heroes of the world. Many years later, that same teacher spoke at an event commemorating Khalili's achievements.

"Whilst growing up in Iran it was my desire to be a doctor. Then I had to do my national service and I was posted to a remote village where I became an 'army medic'. The local population were very intense about their religion and they had some misleading views of

Jews. They were at the mercy of their mullahs who only promoted greater ignorance. Due to these problems I decided not to identify myself as a Jew. I spent the whole 18 months in the village (other conscripts would disappear for days) and got on very well with the people, even becoming a midwife delivering a number of babies. I remember one occasion where I was woken at 4am to attend the local mayor's home as his wife had had birth complications. Someone had cut the umbilical cord but left it untied and she was bleeding to death. I tied the cord and finished the job. Inevitably, the mayor was truly grateful. The people of the village were so happy with my work they bestowed the honorific title of "Sayyid" on me, so I became known as Sayyid Khalili."

"Towards the end of my service my driver discovered I was a Muslim. Then on the very last day, as I was about to leave the village

2,000 angry men gathered with an assortment of swords, shovels and axes and blocked my way. I was only 19 years old at the time. A few days before some non-Muslim army medics had been killed and I thought I was in real danger. My driver tried to incite the crowd against me, but then the mayor, who was beside me, turned and gave me a big hug and lots of kisses and reminded the people all the things I had done for them. 'If that is being Jewish,' he proclaimed, 'then I am a Jew too!' Upon hearing that the people warmed towards me and let me through: good deeds are never forgotten, I guess."

But there is a bigger lesson here for Khalili. "You see, the people had only been exposed to their mullahs, but once someone reasonable spoke to them with a different perspective, they were happy to change their views. This is why I maintain that ignorance is the real weapon of mass destruction. If people would make the effort to know each other and find out more about each other's cultures, beliefs, opinions, then there would be much less hostility in this world."

In stating this Khalili echoes the Qur'anic verse about *ta'ruf* in surah *Hujurat*. And it is this philosophy that underlines his involvement in another unique and far-sighted project. For over 10 years now the Maimonides Foundation has been promoting understanding and co-operation between Jews and Muslims. "One of the things we do is organise visits for young people to mosques and synagogues. After such visits I have seen the youngsters shaking hands, hugging and kissing each other. They realise that somebody is poisoning the atmosphere out there and creating friction and hostility between them. They become aware of the need to speak more the language of peace and harmony." The Foundation has organised some truly innovative programmes. There is the Maimonides football league for Jewish and Muslim school children, hosted by Arsenal FC. In 2004 the Foundation paid for the translation from English into Arabic 3000 copies of a book retelling the stories of Prophets Joseph and Moses from the Qur'an. Also in 2004 the Foundation took busloads of Muslim and Jewish children to the exhibition *Heaven on Earth: Art from Islamic Lands*, at London's Somerset House. "The Maimonides Foundation is very close to my heart and I am very proud of its work. As I have said before, people will gather round beauty, like bees gather round a pot of honey."

Nasser Khalili is a benefactor of international standing. In July 2005 the Khalili Research Centre was opened at Oxford University with a £2.3m benefaction from the Khalili Family Trust. The Centre

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Professor Khalili signing books at the launch

brings together for the first time the university's research and teaching in Islamic art and archaeology by establishing a community of leading scholars and students near the famous Ashmolean Museum. The Trust also funded the refurbishment of the Khalili Lecture Theatre at SOAS, where Khalili had been a student, then research professor and then member of the governing body. He has funded numerous Chairs and Fellowships in the field of Islamic art. His magnanimity is easy to understand when he recalls a lesson taught by his mother: "It is far better to give with a warm hand," she said when I was 15 'than with a cold hand.' People then get to benefit whilst you are still alive and you get to see the results yourself."

Being an immigrant himself Khalili is acutely aware of his responsibilities. "They lie here, in Britain," he maintains firmly. "This country has given more than any other European country to its immigrants and we all need to play our individual role in ensuring the continued well-being of our nation. It starts at home where parents need to instil moral and ethical values and be concerned why their daughter isn't going to school or their son isn't getting a job." For the first time in the interview, Khalili becomes a little agitated. "We all need to take greater individual responsibility over the things we

control. Focusing too much on international conflicts distracts from the immediate problems on your own doorstep."

So, what next for this man described by the Iranian ambassador as the Ambassador of Culture? He is still searching for a museum to house the entire collection – for which he has paid around half a billion dollars over 35 years. In addition to his Islamic art his collection also features Japanese, Spanish and Swedish art. The highest price he has paid for a single item is \$10m for Rashid al-Din's 14<sup>th</sup> century *Jami' al-Tawarikh* – a Compendium of Chronicles. This forms volume 27 of his Islamic art collection and on page 66 of his new book there is a miniature of Jonah and the Whale from the Compendium. Khalili would prefer the museum to be in London, where he believes the largest number of people will be able to view the magnificent legacy of the Muslim people. No definite site has been found yet, "you have to accept your destiny and believe in it," he says enigmatically. The question remains whether London is ready and willing to give a home to the largest single collection of Islamic art, the exhibition of which will enlighten the British people about a civilisation they have largely ignored and that is presently being demonised. If it happens, that surely will be Khalili's lasting legacy to the people of London, Britain and the world. ●