Is Muslim Embrace of Darwin Inevitable?

Daniel Haqiqatjou
Author Bio

Daniel Haqiqtjou has a Bachelor’s degree in Physics from Harvard University and a Masters in Philosophy of Science from Tufts University.
In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

This is the first part of a two-part series surveying and evaluating Muslim responses to evolutionary science. The first part covers the sociological, political, and theological dimensions that have impacted these responses and tilted the scales in favor of Darwinism. The second part will delve into the actual responses and evaluate them on the basis of their internal coherence and compatibility with Islamic ontology and epistemology.

Do Islamic theology and evolutionary science conflict on the question of human origins? This is a question fraught with conceptual nuances and theological implications that Muslims have hotly debated since the introduction of Darwin’s evolutionary theory to the Muslim world nearly 140 years ago. Over this time, Muslim responses to evolution have ranged from outright rejection to enthusiastic acceptance. To complicate matters further, sociological and political factors have played no small part in shaping the contours of the debate in the Muslim world. As historian Marwa Elshakry describes in her book *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*, at times accepting Darwinism was due less to a careful intellectual assessment of the theory and more to Muslim intellectuals, politicians, and elites simply signaling their social and political alignment with modernization, secularization, and Europeanization. Likewise, the rejection of Darwinism by traditional Muslim scholars and their students was at times a marker of their general opposition to colonialism and its cultural and religious impact on Muslim society writ large.

In present-day discourse as well, the broader question of conflict between religion and science has become highly politicized. This politicization creates pressure on contemporary Muslims to situate themselves on the “right” side of the debate, independently of any careful consideration of theology or the details of evolutionary theory itself.

A survey of Muslim responses to evolution reveals the variety of approaches intellectuals and religious scholars have taken in opining on the compatibility of Islam and evolutionary theory. Some Muslim scholars and thinkers have argued that evolution is not Islamically acceptable while other

---

1 Throughout the essay, I will use the terms “evolution,” “evolutionary theory,” “Darwinism,” and “Darwinian evolution” interchangeably.

thinkers have claimed that there is no conflict between Islam and evolution. A third group has claimed that evolution itself is not problematic from an Islamic standpoint, but when it comes to the question of human origins, evolution does not apply.³ Before delving into these positions, one must appreciate not only the social and political stakes in these conversations, but also the larger theological considerations and genealogy of ideas that have played formative roles in influencing the substance of the extended engagement Muslims have had with evolutionary thought.

Other than a small handful of academic works, most writings on the topic of “Muslim responses to evolution” have bypassed these larger contextual factors, foregoing a careful analysis of the larger epistemic nuances that are entailed by an Islamic acceptance of “science” as a category of knowledge. Rather than step back and take stock of these integral issues, the Muslim literature on evolution typically is in a rush to jump into the fray and argue about the different ways Muslims have “correctly” or “incorrectly” interpreted the details of evolutionary science and the inherent “compatibility” of Islamic texts with that science. These kinds of questions are certainly worthwhile and indeed critical, yet they can only provide a partial picture in absence of the contextual and epistemological considerations that give color, vibrancy, and significance to the larger concerns at hand. Towards that end, this essay overviews these contextual and epistemological factors and argues that the soil of modern Muslim theological thought has been tilled in a way that makes it highly conducive to the acceptance of evolutionary theory. This means that those Muslims who oppose the idea that Islam and evolution are compatible are fighting an uphill battle, not because their arguments and conceptual analyses are less compelling or less rational (I am committed to the position that, indeed, they are neither), but because the cards have been stacked against them in the context of modern Muslim intellectual discourse. Unpacking that larger discourse as it pertains to evolution will do much to clear the fog so that the question at hand -- Are Islam and evolution compatible? -- can be addressed on the basis of Islamically valid epistemic methods without those methods being derailed by social and political biases or other irrelevant external pressures.

The Politics of Debating Islam and Evolution

Before exploring the different Muslim perspectives on evolution, it is necessary to appreciate some of the greater cultural, political, and sociological factors that influence Muslim views on science in the modern world. In the current era, many Muslim scholars and intellectuals have claimed, and many Muslim laypeople believe, that Islam and the Quran are one hundred percent “scientifically accurate” and that Islam is a “scientific religion.” Like the adherents of other religions, many modern Muslims appeal to the authority of science to justify and legitimate their theological commitments in the context of political establishments, social structures, and cultural norms that hold science to be ontologically and epistemologically supreme. Given this authority of and appeal to science as objective truth, the perception among modern Muslims is that the degree to which one’s religion aligns with that objective truth determines how objectively true one’s religion is. As professor of religion James Lewis describes, in a pluralistic world in which adherents of different religious traditions claim to have the Truth, science is a convenient arbitrator due to its appearance of universality. By “hitching their wagon” to the veritable diesel locomotive of cultural, political, and epistemological power that is science, Muslims stand to benefit from portraying their religious beliefs and their scriptures as fundamentally scientific or at least “scientifically compliant.” This benefit can take many forms; e.g., experiencing Islam and the Quran as conformant with science provides a validation of religious faith and a boost in conviction for a Muslim individual. In light of this, it is not hard to see why some Muslims would be inherently resistant to even the mere suggestion that something in the Quran, such as the account of human origins through the creation of Adam, is not compatible with scientific consensus, or even outright contradicts it.

Beyond personal conviction, however, contemporary Muslims also benefit socially and politically by portraying their religious commitments as conformant with scientific consensus. American political discourse and how

---

4 An example of this is the work and influence of Maurice Bucaille, whose book *The Bible, the Quran, and Science* became highly influential in the Muslim world since its publication in 1976. Bucaille claimed that the Quran is in “perfect agreement with modern science,” an idea that is oft repeated in mosques and madrasas to this day.

American Muslims, for example, plug themselves into that discourse reveals a microcosm of this dynamic. As recent surveys on American political parties demonstrate, American Democrats are far more likely to accept evolution than their Republican counterparts. At the same time, the majority of American Muslims identify with the Democratic party over the Republican party due to Democratic policy positions being seen as more friendly to Muslim civil rights concerns as compared to the GOP, which is seen by many Muslims as being “Islamophobic” and generally opposed to Muslim interests. American Muslim political alignment with the left wing and opposition to the right wing are bound to influence Muslim perspectives on a large variety of issues, including Muslim attitudes toward science and evolution. Given that Muslim youth tend to be even more left-leaning than the American Muslim population as a whole, one might expect to see young Muslims even more inclined to accept the validity of evolution and to feel that evolution does not pose any contradictions to their Islamic faith. Here again, it is a kind of political pressure and not a careful, Islamically grounded analysis that tips the scales in favor of the perspective that conveniently sees Islam and evolution as compatible.

On a more global scale, political authorities have associated “literal” readings of the Quran as conducive to violent extremism. Terror groups like ISIS and Alqaeda are often accused of “literalism” in their approach to the Quran. This association between terror groups and literalism obviously impacts Muslim attitudes towards the acceptability of “literalism” as an approach to understanding revelation and, hence, Muslim attitudes toward a literal reading of Adam and Eve in the Quran. After all, the argument goes, it would be nothing more than a kind of literalism to insist that the Quranic narrative of human origins through the creation of Adam and Eve is a literal historical account. And insofar as this Islamic creationist narrative, on the one hand, and terrorism/extremism, on the other, are—accurately or inaccurately—associated with “literalism,” there is political pressure for Muslims to distance themselves from anything that smacks of being literalistic and, by extension, creationist.

---

This supposed political connection between Islamic creationism and violent extremism was expressed most explicitly when in 2011 a British Muslim public figure, Usama Hasan, received death threats for, among other things, his views on the compatibility of Islam and Darwinian evolution. Political groups like the Quilliam Foundation—a controversial counter-extremism think tank in the UK—pointed to these death threats as an example of how promoting an “open,” “free-thinking” intellectual culture that accepts Darwinian evolution is a potent antidote to extremism and hence terrorism, while its opposite—namely, an “anti-intellectual” culture that is “closed-minded” toward Darwinian thought—is conducive to terrorism.

On the other end of the spectrum, influential Muslim creationist Adnan Oktar—who is more commonly known by his pseudonym Harun Yahya—has argued, conversely, that an implicit acceptance of Darwinism contributes to terrorism. He argues that this is because Darwinism promotes the principle of “survival of the fittest,” which encourages military conquest at any cost. This mentality, according to Oktar, breeds extremism and has the potential to result in terroristic acts against civilian populations. In this way, the politically charged accusation of extremism has been deployed in different contexts to influence Muslim attitudes on evolutionary theory, where both the acceptance and the rejection of evolution have been associated with the threat of terror and violence.

The use of political pressure to shape and mold Muslim theological attitudes on science is by no means a new phenomenon. State-sponsored modernization and secularization programs throughout the Muslim world in the twentieth century overtly promoted Darwinism and, in some instances, all but required Muslim acceptance of it. In Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was a proponent of Darwinism and his sweeping secularization of Turkish education in the 1920s injected evolutionary biology into the nationwide curriculum. In India, the influential Muslim reformer Syed Ahmad Khan in the late nineteenth century established multiple colleges and institutes of education backed by the British colonizers aimed at modernizing the sub-

---

11 Kaya, Veyssel. "Can the Quran Support Darwin? An Evolutionist Approach by Two Turkish Scholars after the Foundation of the Turkish Republic." The Muslim World 102.2 (2011): 357-70.
continent and promoting British values and, by extension, British colonial rule. Darwinism was a prominent part of the curriculum in all these schools.\textsuperscript{12} Similar state-sponsored efforts took place in Iran, Jordan, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Muslim world throughout the twentieth century. If Muslim civilization was going to “catch up” to the West economically and technologically, then the first order of business was Western-style scientific education, and a central component of Western-style scientific education was an emphasis on physical causality rather than metaphysical or religious “speculation” as an explanation for the world and the place of man within it. Darwinian evolution as an account of human origins and a human trajectory of advancement and progress through the “survival of the fittest” figured prominently in the new educational model that was being established at institutions of learning throughout Muslim society. In the minds of reformers and state authorities implementing these sweeping changes, acceptance of Darwinism was, in this way, conceptually linked to the future of Muslim civilization and, hence, of Islam itself.

In all these countries, the political and government elites, which over time had become increasingly secularized and antagonistic to traditional religious institutions and modes of thought, considered the acceptance of Darwinism as a mark of education and social refinement, while the rejection of evolutionary theory was seen as religious anti-intellectualism and backwardness.\textsuperscript{13} These attitudes are present to this day among Muslims in both East and West, though the sentiments in favor of Darwinism have been somewhat mitigated in the eyes of the public. In contemporary Arab states like Egypt, for example, there is a widespread loss of optimism in what “foreign” ideologies such as capitalism, secularization, materialism, and even Darwinism can offer, given the decades of corruption and failure on the part of authoritarian government institutions that have operated on the premise of the fruits of modernization.\textsuperscript{14}

To be fair, pulling Muslim masses the other way are numerous religious edicts from prominent Muslim scholarly authorities who have declared acceptance of Darwinism as disbelief (\textit{kufr}). Religious edicts (\textit{fatawa}) issued

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Elshakry, 20.
\end{flushleft}
from these scholars starkly portray evolutionary thought as antithetical to basic Islamic belief. In some countries, being labeled as a Darwinist has even resulted in “blasphemy” or other criminal charges. In 1999, for example, prominent Muslim thinker Abd al-Sabur Shahin was charged and tried in an Egyptian hisba court for his exegetical work *Abi Adam (My Father Adam)*, which attempted to reconcile aspects of evolutionary science with the Quranic narrative of human creation.\(^{15}\) It is not clear, however, that these fatawa have had much impact on the conversations happening in the upper echelons of Muslim academia either in the West or the East, where traditional Islamic scholars have virtually zero authority. It is in those upper echelons that Muslim academics are debating the compatibility of Islam and evolution and, in that context, the opinions coming from religious scholarship are very low on the list of pressures that influence thought and academic production.

These are just a few briefly outlined examples of the many varieties of political and sociological pressures that have to be kept in mind when exploring Muslim intellectual opinions on evolutionary theory and how those opinions have influenced the thinking of the average contemporary Muslim on this topic. The purpose of detailing these pressures is not to claim that Muslim responses to evolution can be reduced to or fully explained by such “external” forces (though in specific instances, this may in fact be the case). The “internal” modes of reasoning and theological considerations through which Muslim intellectuals have understood and evaluated Darwinism historically up to the present day are more determinative of the kinds of responses and critiques Muslims have produced. The rest of this essay will focus on precisely these modes of reasoning and theological concerns.

“Islam and Science” as a Backdrop to “Islam and Evolution”

Muslim debates on Islam and evolution have always been situated in the context of larger meditations on the relationship between Islam and science. For this reason, we should take a moment to overview embryonically some of the major landmarks of that vast discourse.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 330.
In order to make this overview more tractable, I limit my concern to the Muslim reflections on “modern science” post Darwin. This is the point at which Muslims began responding to the Western concept of science. According to some definitions of science, such as that of Ahmad Dallal in his *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History*, Muslims have been involved in the “sciences” since the ninth century CE insofar as they have engaged in the study of astronomy, optics, and mathematics. But, of course, “science” as an independent category of knowledge or an epistemology was not known or spoken about in those terms by Muslims or anyone else until the modern period. Therefore, this is the period most relevant to our abregé of “Islam and science” in light of “Islam and evolution.”

The conformity or conflict between Islam and modern science has theological implications that Muslim intellectuals have grappled with since the nineteenth century. One common theological perspective has it that, if science perfectly represents physical reality and the Quran is the speech of the One who created that reality, then there should be seamless accord between the two, and any conflict can only be illusory, i.e., not a real conflict.

Historically, numerous influential Muslim reformers and intellectuals, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Husayn al-Jisr, Rashid Rida, Syed Ahmad Khan, and many others, have explicitly or implicitly adopted this view while expressing deep admiration for the scientific enterprise—as exemplified by European economic and technological superiority—and encouraging the Muslim masses to see Western-style science as not only a means to economic and social progress but also as something that Islam itself promotes in and of itself. Afghani famously wrote: “There are no riches in the world without science and there is no wealth in the world other than science.” Abduh concurred with this sentiment. His *Tafsir al-Manar*, which was compiled by his devoted student Rashid Rida, a prolific scholar in his own right, is replete with a reading of the Quran that beseeches believers to educate themselves in science: “We Muslims are fortunately under no necessity of disputing with science or the findings of medicine regarding the correction of a few traditional interpretations. For the Quran itself is too elevated in character to be in opposition to science.” Furthermore, “[w]e see

---

no reason for their progress to wealth and power except the advancement of education and the sciences among them.” As such, Muslims must “[e]ndeavor with all our might to spread these sciences in our country.”

In order to justify what seemed to them like the transformative value of modern science to their Muslim audiences, reformers like Abduh and al-Jisr relied on two sources of authority: historical scholarly opinion and exegesis of the Quran. As for the former, science was broadly construed by these intellectuals as a facet of reason (‘aql) or even the embodiment of reason itself. This characterization allowed them to connect their treatments of science to a larger history of the Muslim discourse on ‘aql. The compatibility of reason (as defined by the Muslim scholar or school of thought in question) and revelation (again as defined by the Muslim scholar or school of thought in question) was a widely accepted principle firmly embedded in the modus operandi of all major schools of thought in the field of Islamic scholastic theology (‘ilm al-kalam). If science was a component of rationality and rationality was universally accepted as part and parcel of Islamic epistemology, and hence theology, then by extension the natural sciences had to be accepted as part of that epistemology and theology as well.

The second dialectical method of positioning science within the existing normative structures and commitments of the average Muslim was Quranic exegesis. A new genre of “scientific exegesis” (tafsir ‘ilmī) attempted to justify science as a valid and necessary epistemological avenue. Many modern exegetes have construed verses of the Quran that command man to look for the signs (ayat) of God in the heavens, on the horizons, and even within their own selves as Divine calls to conduct scientific investigation. According to this interpretation, God Himself is commanding mankind in general, and Muslims in particular, to pick up the telescope, the microscope, etc., and to investigate the natural world because that investigation will not only have worldly benefit in terms of technology and economic advancement, but it will also bring one closer to recognizing and appreciating the handiwork of God. To forego scientific investigation, on the other hand, or to question in any other way the value of scientific empiricism is to cast one’s lot with the

---

18 Elshakry, 14.
19 One example of this is verse 41:53, “We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. But is it not sufficient concerning your Lord that He is, over all things, a Witness?”
ignorant (juhhal) and the lazy who care not for bettering themselves or their country and who certainly have no concern for seeking out God. Whereas traditionally the paths toward seeking God included meditative thought and reflection (tafakkur, tadabbur, etc.), remembrance of God (dhikr), fasting (sawm), voluntary night prayer (tahajjud), etc., now scientific investigation in the laboratory became yet another path to the Divine.

This theological shift in the understanding of the connection between God and mankind also impacted conceptions of authorities of knowledge. Whereas the religious scholars (‘ulama) had always been defined in Islamic thought as the beacons of knowledge and religious authority, increasingly now engineers, scientists, technicians, and medical doctors took their place as the umma’s “learned.” In some regions, e.g., Iran and South Asia, many even began to perceive religious scholars as hucksters and deadbeats who were too lacking in the requisite intelligence to pursue scientific, professional educations in the fields of engineering or medicine and thus had to resort to the madrasa to become “mullas” or “moulvis” and earn a living by tricking simple-minded people into accepting their religious authority.20

Anthropologist Aria Nakissa argues that, as Western forms of education spread across the Muslim world, Muslim conceptions of knowledge were also transformed, with far-reaching consequences. Traditional areas of Islamic religious knowledge, such as law (fiqh) and creed (‘aqida), began to be recast in the mold of the natural sciences. Nakissa argues that prior to the nineteenth century and the global influence of Western science, the study of Islamic law was seen as a language-centric exercise. He says:

[Traditionally] legal training was modeled on the mastery of grammar. Accordingly, education involved skill-acquisition through repetitive exercise. Research was not seen as an important goal. Muslim scholars believed that just as there is no progress or creativity in grammar, there is none in law. Although Muslim scholars acknowledged the need to adjust the application of rules in response to different circumstances, they did not equate doing so with innovation. In modern times, legal training has come to be modeled on the natural sciences. This new episteme has transformed Shari‘a scholarship into a research oriented endeavor

---

directed at “advancing” legal knowledge over time through the production of “discoveries” and novel perspectives. This transformation has fundamentally altered patterns of legal reasoning, particularly with respect to understandings of ijtihad and taqlid.\textsuperscript{21}

Nakissa’s focus is on Islamic law, but his insights apply broadly to other modes of Muslim religious thinking. The fact that modern Muslims have been predisposed to understand knowledge in terms of science and, hence, as inherently progressive, means that they will be more willing to approach their reading of scripture as an opportunity for new “discovery.” In this perspective, modern Muslim scholarship may very well be capable of “discovering” new meanings and new implications of the Quran that were overlooked by centuries of Muslims in the past, up to and including the earliest Muslim generations. In fact, the copious amount of attention and literature contemporary Muslims have dedicated to “uncovering” the “scientific miracles of the Quran” attests to the widespread influence of precisely this perspective.\textsuperscript{22} In contrast, classical scholarship on the miraculousness of the Quran (\textit{i}j\textit{az al-Qur’an) focused almost exclusively on the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the Divine speech.

How should contemporary Muslims understand these developments? Certainly, the conflation of science and reason and the claim that the Quran endorses science is something that requires careful analysis and consideration. If Muslims are to believe that God endorses scientific investigation as a valid epistemic avenue to understanding creation at large, what does that mean exactly? Does it mean that anything and everything published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal ought to be accepted into the overarching ontology of Muslims? What specific kind of scientific investigation can validly contribute to the Muslim worldview? Are all disciplines of science equally acceptable, or are some disciplines more correct or “authentic” (perhaps we could borrow the notion of “\textit{sahih}”) than others, and on what basis is that determined? Are there any scientific conclusions that Muslims could reject or at least hold in doubt in light of verses of the Quran and traditional understandings of them? What kinds of considerations would that entail? These are important questions and

\textsuperscript{22} Simply conduct a Google search of “scientific miracles in the Quran” to see many examples of this.
distinctions that do not figure into virtually any of the modern Muslim discussions of Islam and science, usually because “science” is assumed within these discussions to be a monolithic, uniform category of knowledge, thought, and methodology. But these are precisely the questions that Muslims must address due to how much the debate on Islam and evolution relies on assumptions about the compatibility of Islam and science in general.

Many more examples can be given of the manner in which the episteme of natural science has impacted Muslim theology and religious thinking more broadly, but the underlying point is that this background makes the prospect of an evolutionary reinterpretation of scripture and theology that much more plausible—for some perhaps even inevitable—in the modern Muslim mind. Understanding this development allows us to appreciate better how those Muslims who object to evolutionary theory frame their objections and how those Muslims who accept evolutionary theory frame their endorsements. We can also develop a deeper perspective on the kinds of discursive strategies such Muslims use to justify their views and argue against their interlocutors. These debates do not happen in a vacuum nor on a smooth playing field. Rather, certain social pressures, as well as wider metaphysical presumptions such as those we have overviewed in this essay, tilt the dialectic, and make the acceptance of evolutionary theory all but inevitable in the minds of many Muslims. Identifying this tilt gives us the opportunity to even the odds so that we can conduct an unbiased, clear-sighted investigation of the question at hand: Do Islam and evolutionary science conflict? This is the question we will attend to in the next installment of our series, in sha’ Allah.