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Evolution and Muslim Responses to It

The first encounter with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in the Muslim world did not occur through the translation of his book *On the Origin of Species*, first published in 1859, into Arabic or other languages spoken in Muslim countries. The book only appeared partially in Arabic translation in 1918; a complete translation did not appear until 1964. Rather, Darwin's theory of evolution was introduced into the Muslim world through specific ideological channels. In the Arab world, a number of Arab Christians, who studied medicine at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University) in Beirut, introduced the theory via various Arabic-language publications including articles in the popular science journal *al-Muqtataf*. For them, the evolutionary theory was a useful instrument to propagate secularism and materialism on scientific grounds, ideologies they themselves adhered to. In the Ottoman Empire, the evolutionary theory, mixed with materialism, was propagated by a group of intellectuals, who formed the Young Turk movement and led a rebellion against Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II (d. 1918). Among South Asian Muslims, the modernist Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), known for his pro-British political stances, was one of the earliest Muslim intellectuals to address and also advocate Darwin's theory. Any

considerations of the evolutionary theory in the Muslim world should keep this “ideologized” introduction of the theory in mind. Even today, it seems sometimes difficult for many Muslims to “de-ideologize” the evolutionary theory and judge it on its own merits while ignoring the ideological and sociopolitical agendas of its early proponents. In the following text, Muslim responses to the evolution theory will be presented under three main headings, namely public, intellectual, and theological.

Public Responses.

Early literature in the Muslim world on Darwinism includes references, however fragmentary, that show a certain degree of public interest in the debates revolving around this theory. For instance, Shiblī Shumayyil (d. 1917), one of the prominent alumni of the aforementioned Syrian Protestant College and the foremost popularizer of Darwin’s theory of evolution in the Arab world, spoke about an “immense controversy,” triggered by his book on evolution among a small number of the intellectual elite and a great number of common people. The results of available surveys consistently show an overall negative attitude toward the theory of evolution, not only among common Muslims but also among the educated elite. Nidhal Guessoum, professor of physics and astronomy at the American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and an advocate of the evolutionary theory, conducted a survey during the fall of 2007 among 100 students and 100 faculty members at his university. The proposition “it is only an unproven theory, and I don’t believe in it” was chosen by 62 percent of the respondents, whereas 25 percent chose “it is correct, except for humans” and only 13 percent chose “it is strongly confirmed by evidence.” The Turkish Muslim creationist Adnan Oktar, known by his pen name Harun Yahya, is usually perceived as one of the main figures responsible for propagating this Darwin-unfriendly atmosphere. Oktar makes use of a broad network inside and outside the Muslim world and closely cooperates with American Christian creationists. With over 150 books translated into over a dozen languages, elegantly produced but distributed freely or at low prices, audio-visual material that is often distributed for free and a website that contains extensive free material, Yahya’s network continues to influence both educated and common Muslims living in the Muslim world and also in the West. Cases of Muslim students living in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands who rejected, on religious grounds, classes teaching evolution were interpreted as part of Yahya’s influence on young Muslims in the West.

Intellectual Responses.

A great deal of the intellectual debates on the theory of evolution focused on the scientific basis of the theory and the worldview that can be constructed as a result. Muslim intellectuals wondered if such a worldview can be reconciled with Islamic belief concerning the story of creation as outlined in the Qur'ān and *sunnah*.

In his *al-Radd 'alā al-dahriyyīn* (Refutation of the Materialists), published first in Persian around 1878 and then in Arabic in 1885, the prominent reformist Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) launched an onslaught against Darwin's theory and tried to present it as a collection of unscientific, illogical, and absurd claims. He couched the theory in the following words: "A group [of those materialists] claimed that the germs of all species, and in particular the animals, are in fact identical and there is no difference between the species in essence. Therefore, they held that these germs can transform itself from one species to another depending on time, place, needs, necessities and other external factors. The founder of this group is Darwin, who has written a book to prove that man descended from an ape. ... According to the assertion of this Darwin, it is also possible that a flea becomes an elephant over the centuries, or that the elephant becomes a flea again" ('Imāra, 1968, pp. 134–135). In this book, al-Afghānī combined a critique of Darwin's theory of evolution, which he did not properly understand, with an attack on the philosophical and sociopolitical ideas promoted by al-Afghānī's adversaries, including the aforementioned Sayyid Ahmad Khan. That is, al-Afghānī's severe attack was not directed toward science or Darwin's theory, but rather toward a group of intellectuals in the Muslim world who, in the eyes of al-Afghānī, were advocates of complete Westernization of the Muslim world. Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), one of al-Afghānī's close friends, indicated that al-Afghānī wrote this book while he was in a state of passionate anger against this group. About twenty years later, al-Afghānī once again addressed the evolutionary theory in his book *al-Khāṭirāt* (Ideas), in which he distinguished between Darwin's theory and the ideas of philosophers such as Büchner, Spencer, and Shiblī Shumayyil. These philosophers, al-Afghānī argued, unjustifiably used Darwin's theory for propagating materialism and atheism. He added that the theory of evolution is reconcilable with Islam and that its basics were already known for early Muslim alchemists such as Abū Bakr ibn Bishrūn.

The response of the Egyptian intellectual Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī (d. 1954) was more nuanced than the moderate version of al-Afghānī's views. Wajdī argued that Darwinism, in principle, should have been approached exclusively as a cluster of ideas related to the science of nature (*al-ilm al-ṭabīʿī*). Because this theory touched on the issue of man's creation, Wajdī recognized, its implications broke out into other fields of knowledge such as philosophy, ethics, and even politics. That is why, Wajdī stressed, Darwin's theory should first be de-ideologized in the sense that one's preconceptions and presumed beliefs should not become the yardstick by which the theory is measured. The theory should rather be judged on its own merits. According to Wajdī, this is the optimal approach that every Muslim should adopt because in the end he or she is looking for nothing else than the absolute truth.

Subsequent debates on the theory of evolution still reflect similar positions to those of al-Afghānī's harsh and moderate views and Wajdī's nuanced stance. The views of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, resemble al-Afghānī's harsh standpoint. Nasr questioned the scientific basis of the theory of evolution that, according to his own words, is metaphysically impossible and logically absurd. He argued that much biological and anthropological evidence has been brought against this theory by what he described as outstanding European biologists. According to Nasr, this criticism was always ignored because evolutionism is one of the pillars of the modern worldview. If evolutionism were to be rejected, the whole structure on which the modern world is based would collapse and one would have to accept the reality of a Creator. Nasr stresses that the worldview proposed by this theory was very instrumental in destroying the spiritual meaning and sense of sacredness of God's creation, as discussed in sacred scriptures including the Qur'ān. On the other side of the spectrum stands the aforementioned Nidhal Guessoum, who always confirms the scientific basis of the theory of evolution. To him, the process of evolution is an established fact of nature but people should still distinguish between evolution on the one hand and the theories that may be constructed to account for it on the other. Guessoum also insisted that a nonliteral understanding of the Islamic scriptures can accommodate the scientific assertions of Darwinism.

Theological Responses.

The Lebanese Muslim theologian Ḥusayn al-Jisr (1845–1909), according to the testimony of his son Nadīm al-Jisr, was not only the first Muslim theologian but also the first theologian who had the courage to write a book, entitled *al-Risāla al-Ḥāmidiyya* (The Hamidian Treatise), in which he argued that the theory of Darwin, in case it is scientifically proven, does not contradict belief in the existence of God, the true Creator of everything. The overall aim of al-Jisr's treatise was to prove that Islam can be harmonized with rationality and therefore also with natural sciences. Al-Jisr was well informed about Darwin's theory. He was also aware of the debates between the evolutionists and their opponents, especially regarding mutations and the missing fossils of intermediate forms. However, none of the two camps could achieve a decisive victory and thus, al-Jisr added, the theory of evolution remains only a scientific postulation that can be confirmed or denied in the future on the basis of more advanced scientific research.

In order to verify the compatibility of Darwinism with the narrative of creation in the Islamic scriptures, al-Jisr started with two main premises. First, the narrative of creation in Islam falls under the category of belief (*‘aqīda*) and thus can be constructed only on the basis of scriptural texts whose authenticity is (semi-)decisive and whose meaning is unequivocal. The second premise is that the authentic narrative of creation, as outlined by the definitive scriptural texts, is concise in nature because the main aim of these texts is to instill a firm belief in God as the Creator and not to provide scientific details about the process of creation itself. On the basis of these two premises and after reviewing the relevant Qur'ānic verses, al-Jisr concluded that the gist of the theory of evolution is compatible with the Islamic cosmology, as long as there is room within this theory for God as the ultimate Creator. However, al-Jisr added, some aspects of the evolutionary theory do contradict the apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) of some Qur'ānic verses. But these verses do not belong to the aforementioned category of definitive scriptural texts because their content is in principle open to manifold interpretations. The theory of evolution will always fit within one of the possible interpretations but not necessarily the widely accepted one, namely the apparent meaning (*al-ẓāhir*). Thus, embracing the full account of the evolutionary theory will necessitate applying allegorical or metaphorical interpretation for some Qur'ānic verses. Such an allegorical interpretation is possible, al-Jisr held, but not necessary as long as the theory of evolution is not yet an established scientific fact. Al-Jisr's treatise proved quickly popular. It was translated into Urdu, Turkish, and other languages, and some 20,000 issues were published in Istanbul alone. Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II awarded it

a Sultan's Prize in 1891. According to one of al-Jisr's disciples, the renowned reformist Rashīd Riḍa (d. 1935) who defended al-Jisr's view, this treatise also received the approval of various Muslim theologians in Syria and Turkey, and the religious scholars of al-Aẓhar in Egypt. A number of contemporary Muslim theologians still adopt views similar to those of al-Jisr on the theory of evolution, such as the Egyptian Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī.

However, opposing voices remained. A *fatwā* issued by the late grand shaykh of al-Aẓhar, Maḥmud Shaltūt (d. 1963), serves as an illustrative example. A person sent him the following question: "Do Muslim religious scholars oppose the evolution theory on the basis of well-founded religious arguments or just out of stubbornness?" In response, Shaltūt said that there are three main sources of knowledge in Islam, namely sound perception (*al-ḥiss al-salīm*), correct rational enquiry (*al-naẓar al-ʿaqlī al-ṣaḥīḥ*), and authentic revealed tradition (*al-khabar al-ṣādiq*). According to Shaltūt, the theory of evolution, which maintained that man descended from another animal species through evolution and progress, is not based on any of these acceptable sources of knowledge. On the basis of a number of Qur'ānic verses (15:28–29, 49:13, 86:05–07, 22:05) about the creation of Adam and his offspring, Shaltūt concluded that this theory contradicts the authentic divine revelation. Furthermore, Shaltūt added, this issue falls outside the scope of perception and therefore cannot be verified through experiment. In his view, this subject belongs to the invisible world [*ghayb*], of which only God has knowledge. Thus, the opposition of Muslim theologians to the theory of evolution was based on reasonable arguments and did not originate from stubbornness, Shaltūt concluded. Similar opposing views are also advocated by some contemporary Muslim theologians, such as the Jordanian ʿUmar Sulaymān al-Ashqar.

The responses to Darwin's theory of evolution, especially those of an intellectual and theological nature, are considerably diversified and by no means monolithic. However, the common denominator among these diverse responses is that they all reject the theory of evolution once it is presented in purely materialistic and atheistic form. Thus, a constructive debate on evolutionary theory in Islam can be developed if the theory is kept separate from political struggles and if the religious beliefs in God as Creator are not derogated. The renowned Muslim evolutionist Salman Hameed expressed this point by saying: "Efforts that link evolution with atheism will cut short the dialogue, and a vast majority of Muslims will reject evolution" (2008, p. 1637). What is still strikingly missing in

the available wide array of responses to the theory of evolution is the scientific one. Scientific debates on this theory continue to take place in Western academies, a clear indication of the deplorable state of scientific research in the Muslim world.

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