

## **Muslim Responses to the Evolution Theory**

The first encounter with Darwin's theory of evolution in the Muslim world did not occur through translating his book *On the Origin of Species*, first published in 1859, into Arabic or other languages spoken in Muslim countries. For instance, this book only appeared partially in Arabic translation in 1918; a complete translation did not appear until 1964. Darwin's evolution theory, however, was introduced to 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-Muqataṭaf* (Selection). For them, the evolution theory was a good instrument to propagate secularism and materialism, ideologies they themselves adhered to, on scientific grounds. In the Ottoman Empire, the evolution theory, also mixed with materialism, was propagated by a group of intellectuals, who finally formed the Young Turk movement. The theory was for them an ideological device through which they can justify their efforts to dethrone 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 evolution theory. A careful analysis of the subsequent discussions on the evolution theory in the Muslim world should keep this "ideologized" introduction of the theory in mind. Many of the participants in these discussions till now have difficulties to "de-ideologize" the evolution theory and judge it on its own merits, away from the ideological and socio-political agendas of its early proponents. Below, Muslim responses to the evolution theory will be presented under three main headings, namely public, intellectual and theological.

### **(1) Public responses**

Early literature in the Muslim world on the evolution theory includes references, however fragmentary, which 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. Till now, there have been but a few, usually small-scale, surveys of attitudes towards evolution among Muslims, which demonstrate that further research in this regard is an ultimate desideratum. The results of available surveys consistently show an overall negative attitude towards the evolution theory, 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 currently one of the strenuous advocates of the evolution 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 per cent 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 culprits for propagating this Darwin-unfriendly sphere. 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 in over a dozen languages, elegantly produced but distributed freely or against low prices, audio-visual material that is often distributed for free and a website that contains tons of free material, Yahya’s network manage to influence both educated and common Muslims living in the Muslim world and also in the West. Cases of Muslim students living in the UK and the Netherlands, said to refuse following evolution classes on religious grounds, were interpreted as part of Yahya’s influence on young Muslims in the West.

## **(2) Intellectual responses**

A great deal of the intellectual debates on the theory of evolution focused on the (un)questionable scientific basis of the theory and the possible worldview that can be constructed on its basis. Muslim intellectuals wondered if such worldview can be reconciled with the Islamic belief concerning the story of creation as mentioned in the Qur’ān and the Sunna.

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-Afgānī (d. 1897) launched an offensive onslaught on Darwin’s theory and

tried to present it as a bunch of unscientific, illogic 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, 134-35). In this book, al-Afghānī mixed between Darwin’s theory of evolution, which he could not properly understand, on one hand and the philosophical and socio-political ideas promoted by al-Afghānī’s adversaries, including the aforementioned Sayyid Ahmad Khan, on the other hand. Thus, al-Afghānī’s sever attack was not directed towards science or Darwin’s theory but rather towards 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, said that al-Afghānī wrote this book while he was in a state of passionate anger against this group of intellectuals. About twenty years later, al-Afghānī addressed the evolution theory again in his book *Al-Khāṭirāt* (Ideas). Basing himself this time on more rationality and less emotions, he distinguished between Darwin’s theory on one side and Western philosophers such as Büchner and Spencer and Eastern philosophers such as Shiblī Shumayyil on the other side. These philosophers, al-Afghānī argued, unjustly used Darwin’s theory for propagating materialism and atheism. He added that the evolution theory 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), which he formulated by the beginning of the twentieth century, was even more nuanced than the moderate version of al-Afghānī’s views. Wajdī argued that the evolution theory, in principle, should have been approached exclusively as cluster of ideas related to the science of nature (*al-‘ilm al-ṭabī‘ī*). Because this theory touched upon the issue of man’s creation, Wajdī recognized, its implications broke into other fields of knowledge such as philosophy, ethics and even politics. That is

why, Wajdī stressed, Darwin’s theory should first be deideologized in the sense that one’s preconceptions and presumed beliefs should not be the yardstick to which the theory is measured. The theory should rather be judged on its own merits. According to Wajdī, this is the optimal approach that Muslim should adopt because at the end he/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, resembles al-Afghānī’s harsh standpoint. Nasr questioned the scientific basis of the evolution theory which is, according to his own words, 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 upon which the modern world is based would collapse and one would have to accept the incredible wisdom of the Creator. Nasr stressed that the world view proposed by this theory was very instrumental in destroying the spiritual meaning and the sense of the sacredness of Allah’s creation, as stated in sacred scriptures including the Qur’ān. On the other side of the spectrum stands the aforementioned Nidhal Guessoum, who used to confirm 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 one hand and the theories that may be constructed to account for it on the other hand. Guessoum also insisted that a non-literal understanding of the Islamic Scriptures can accommodate the scientific facts presented by the evolution theory which indicate that man evolved from lower species and that all species go back to a common starting point.

### **(3) 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 the first theologian ever who had the courage to write a book, entitled *al-Risāla al-Ḥāmidīyya* (The Hamidian Treatise), in which he argued that the theory of Darwin, in

case it is scientifically proven, does not contradict the belief in the existence of Allah, 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 and related concepts such as natural selection. He was also aware of the debates between the evolutionists and their opponents, especially on mutations and the missing of fossils of intermediate forms. The arguments of the anti-evolutionists were, in al-Jisr's eyes, tedious, boring and sometimes even futile. 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 the evolution theory with the narrative of creation in the Islamic scriptures, al-Jisr started with expounding two main premises. Firstly, 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 substance is unequivocal; not open for multiple interpretations. 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 so much to provide scientific details about the process of creation itself. On the basis of these two premises and after reviewing the relevant Qur'anic verses, al-Jisr concluded that the gist of the evolution theory 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 evolution theory do contradict the apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) of some Qur'anic 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. Thus, embracing the full account of the evolution theory will necessitate applying allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) for some Qur'anic 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 al-Jisr’s disciple, 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, Turkey and also the religious scholars of al-Azhar in Egypt. A number of contemporary Muslim theologians still adopt views similar to those of al-Jisr on the evolution theory such as the Egyptian Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī.

Besides al-Jisr and like-minded theologians, the voices opposing the evolution theory among Muslim theologians also remained audible. A fatwa issued by the late grand Shaykh of al-Azhar, 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-‘aqlī al-ṣaḥīḥ*) and authentic revealed tradition (*al-khabar al-ṣādiq*). According to Shaltut, 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’anic verses (15:28-29, 49:13, 86:05-07, 22:05) about the creation of Adam and his offspring, Shaltut concluded that this theory contradicts the authentic divine revelation. Furthermore, Shaltut added, this issue falls outside the scope of perception and therefore cannot be verified through experiments. 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 evolution theory was based on reasonable arguments and did not originate from stubbornness, Shaltut concluded. Similar opposing views are also advocated by some contemporary Muslim theologians such as the Jordanian ‘Umar Sulaymān al-Ashqar.

To conclude, the responses to Darwin’s theory of evolution, especially those of 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 evolution theory once it is presented in purely materialistic and atheistic garb. Thus, a constructive debate on the evolution 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, couched this point by saying: “Efforts that link evolution with atheism will cut short the dialogue, and a vast majority of Muslims will reject evolution” (Hameed 2008, 1637). What is still strikingly missing in the available wide array of responses to the evolution theory 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.

### **Bibliography**

- Bezirgan, Najm. “The Islamic world.” In *The Comparative Reception of Darwinism*, edited by Thomas F. Glick, pp. 375–387, Austin and London: University of Texas press.
- Ghaly, Mohammed. “Islam en Darwin: De receptie van Darwin en de evolutie theorie in de Islamitische traditie [Islam and Darwin: The reception of the evolution theory in the Islamic tradition].” In *Evolutie: Wetenschappelijk model of seculier geloof* [Evolution: Scientific model or secular belief], edited by Alfred Driessen and Gerard Nienhuis, pp. 129–144, Kampen: Kok, 2010.
- Guessoum, Nidhal. *Islam’s Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011.
- Hameed, Salman. “Bracing for Islamic Creationism.” *Science* 322 (December 2008): 1637–1638.
- ‘Imāra, Muḥammad. *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila li-Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī* [The Complete Works of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī]. Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī li’l-Ṭibā‘a wa’l-Nashr, 1968.
- Jisr, Ḥusayn al-. *Al-Risāla al-Ḥāmidīyya fī ḥaqīqat al-diyāna al-Islāmiyya wa ḥaqīqat al-Sharī‘a al-Muḥammadiyya* (The Hamidian treatise on the truth of Islamic religion and the truth of Muhammadan Sharia). Beirut, 1888.
- Jisr, Nadīm al-. *Qiṣṣat al-Īmān bayna’l-falsafah wa’l-‘ilm wa’l-Qur’ān* (The Story of faith between philosophy, science and Qur’ān), Beirut, n.d.
- Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*. Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001.
- Shumayyil, Shiblī. *Falsafat al-nushū’ wa’l-irtiqā’* [The Philosophy of evolution and progress]. Beirut: Marūn ‘Abbūd, new edition, 1983.

- Wajdī, Muḥammad Farīd. *Al-Islām fī aṣr al-‘ilm* [Islam in the age of science]. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., n.d.

**Mohammed Ghaly, Leiden University, the Netherlands**

Mohammed Ghaly is a graduate of al-Azhar University in Egypt and currently an assistant professor of Islamic Law and Ethics at Leiden University, the Netherlands. After completing his book *Islam and Disability* (Routledge, 2010), Ghaly received the prestigious VENI research grant (2012-2016) from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) to conduct research on Islam and biomedical ethics.