

A World Designed by God

Science and Creationism in Contemporary Islam

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Abstract

Public conflicts between science and religion have become rare in the industrialized West. However, contemporary Muslim thought retains a much stronger sense of an explicitly designed universe infused with moral purpose. Anti-evolution ideas, for example, have been very successful in Turkey, particularly in a recent form adapting Protestant creationism to a Muslim context. The high level of popular misuse of science in the Muslim world suggests that major conflicts between science and religion will have an increasingly Islamic flavor in the coming years.

Science and Religion, East and West

In the industrialized West, science and religion interact in a complex manner. While there is potential conflict due to the supernatural perspective of religion and the naturalism of modern science, the *institutions* of Western science and liberal versions of Judaism and Christianity coexist happily. Many good scientists are quite religious as well. This institutional compatibility is strengthened by cultural separation: our conventional wisdom places science and religion in separate spheres.

This picture of limited intellectual conflict and overall social compatibility, however, does not describe science and religion in the Muslim world. There, modern science has not developed as an indigenous heresy, and in the social realm, science is entangled with concerns about Western influence and the perceived necessity of defending Islamic culture. So the relationship between science and religion in the Muslim world is more unsettled, and occasionally strained.

Science in the Quran

Modern science first impressed Muslims through the extremely powerful technology the Industrialized West developed and used to dominate Muslim countries. Denying the effectiveness of science was not an option for Muslims; the task was to appropriate science while keeping cautious about other Western influences.

Attempts to fit modern science into an Islamic view of the world, therefore, draw on what are considered to be authentically Islamic intellectual resources. These attempts typically try to preserve a sense of the harmony and design in nature. Muslim apologetic literature, for example, emphasizes classical metaphysical proofs of God less than the Christian tradition. Instead, Muslim writers tend to rely on a commonsense version of the argument from design. They consider it blindingly obvious that the universe exhibits a purposeful harmony; only a fool or a malicious person would overlook the divine hand behind it. Defending the faith means reminding listeners of the obvious existence of God, and then pointing them towards the perfection of the Quran, which must of course with similar obviousness must be the uncorrupt Word of God.



Figure 1. Muslim apologetics and expositions of the faith often present a harmonious universe: sublime images of galaxies, or a peaceful meadow with butterflies, and couple it with verses from the Quran. This is from a web site, *Wonders of Creation*, which pair this picture with “Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?” (21:30).

This perception of obviousness has roots in the Quran itself, which takes a similar approach to convince its audience of its divine nature. God has given plenty of “signs” in nature to convince the honest doubter:

It is God who raised the skies without support, as you can see, then assumed His throne, and enthralled the sun and the moon (so that) each runs to a predetermined course. He disposes all affairs, distinctly explaining every sign that you may be certain of the meeting with your Lord. (21:19, Ahmed Ali translation)

Popular apologetics often supplements this attitude with a direct appeal to science. Especially among modernizing sects, claims that certain verses in the Quran anticipate today’s scientific knowledge are popular. Muslims take the Quran itself to be the primary miracle Muhammad presented, so establishing that a document originating among desert dwellers 14 centuries ago contains information only verifiable with modern techniques would be quite impressive. Also drawing on the traditional belief that all useful knowledge is at least rooted in the Quran, such miracle stories have spread far and wide in the Muslim world.

For example, the Quran is supposed to refer to the expanding universe. Some of the verses in question are

We built the heavens by Our authority; and We are the Lord of power and expanse. We spread the earth a carpet; and what comfort we provide! (51:47, 48)

In some contemporary Muslim eyes, ancient Near-Eastern beliefs about a god spreading the earth, anchoring it with mountains, and establishing a habitation for humans becomes a statement of expanding spacetime. Interestingly, the best known book about these Quranic miracles is by a French medical doctor (Bucaille 1979). Even a Western scientist, it would seem, has come to acknowledge that the seemingly backward Islamic world had the most important knowledge all along.

Science-in-the-Quran and naïve design arguments can be embarrassing for Muslims used to working in Western or Westernized academic settings (Akhtar 1990). However, another alternative in academic circles is to advocate an “Islamic Science.” They take Western science to be marred by materialist presuppositions, and look to classical Islamic philosophy to help construct an approach which is more in tune with revealed spiritual realities.

Though the ideas behind “Islamic Science” are supposed to equally apply to physical science and engineering (Bakar 1999), they have been more influential in the social sciences (e.g. IIT 1989; Sahin 2001). This is due to a postmodern intellectual

climate in these disciplines on one hand, and the political success of Islamists on the other, affecting state universities in the Muslim world.

Curiously, even the disreputable science-in-the-Quran apologetics finds its way into the academic realm. For example, some Saudi medical textbooks detail how the Quran tells us about embryonic development (Moore et.al. 1992). So both in the academic and popular arenas of the Muslim world, science is not as culturally separated from religion as it is in the West.

Turkish Creationism

The ambiguous position of science in Islamic culture becomes further clarified when we observe the widespread support for even blatantly pseudoscientific enterprises. The example of Turkish creationism is very illuminating here, since Turkey, being the most Westernized among Muslim countries, is also the stage for some of the most interesting culturally defensive reactions against Western science.

Anti-evolution sentiment in Turkey is not a new phenomenon. Conservative Muslims have always written against evolution (e.g. Akbulut 1980), and academics with strong links to religious orders can be counted upon to occasionally produce attempts at “Alternative Biology” (e.g. Yilmaz & Uzunoglu 1995). Even those Muslim theologians who declare that Islam is compatible with evolution, or go so far as to claim that Muslim thinkers anticipated evolution long before Darwin was born (Bayrakdar 1987), assume a picture of progressive, guided development, usually in the context of the hierarchically structured realities of classical Islamic philosophy, or the Great Chain of Being. Darwinian evolution, with its naturalistic, accident-driven changes, is rarely referred to except in caricature.

However, with the conservative military regime which took power in 1980, and the subsequent religious-influenced governments, a qualitatively new creationism burst on the scene. In a climate of suppression of secular-leftist politics, and military authorities looking to religion to supply an ideology of national unity, Islamists controlling the Education Ministry took the opportunity to act against evolution. Curiously, they discovered and promoted the Protestant creationism in the United States, even officially translating material from the Institute of Creation Research (ICR) to be used as supplemental reading in state schools (Edis 1994).

Creationism at the state level took up and down turns during the politically volatile 1990s, but in the last five years, another new development has changed the picture once again. A new face of creationism has appeared, targeting the public through the mass media rather than through formal education. The “Science Research Foundation” (Bilim Arastirma Vakfi – BAV), an appendage of a religious order led by

Adnan Oktar, has publicized creationism through a number of well-produced books and videos under the pseudonym of “Harun Yahya,” and a series of “international conferences” in which Turkish creationist academics were joined by American creationists associated with the Institute for Creation Research (Edis 1999, Sayin & Kence 1999).

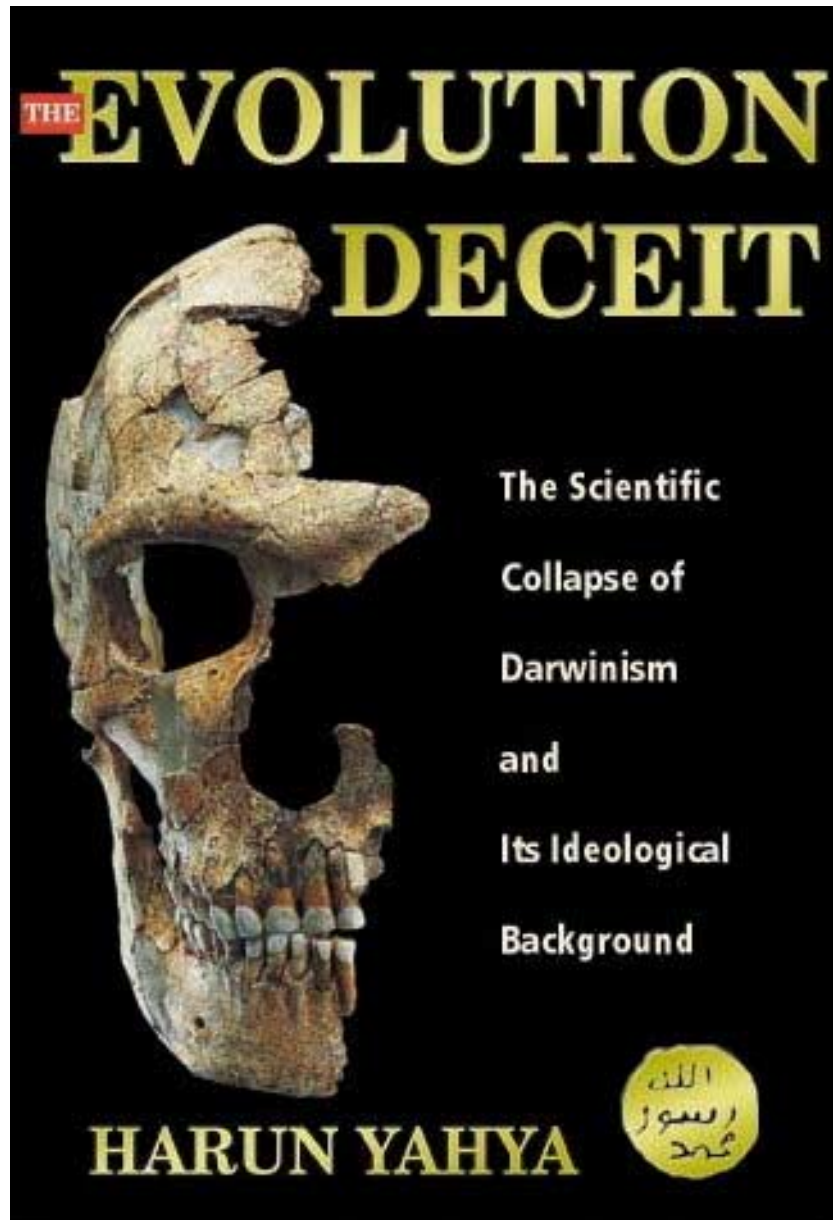


Figure 2. Cover of the English version of Harun Yahya’s primary creationist book.

BAV’s creationism has been notable not just because of their media-savvyness, but also because of the considerable resources they command. They are able to make

their materials – which are quite attractively put together -- available quite cheaply, to the extent of distributing thousands of creationist booklets to passersby on major squares and to students at high school gates. The sources of their finances are quite unclear, as is typical with most Islamist organizations; BAV claims to be supported through donations. Their resources and major media access is the envy of US creationist organizations like the ICR, who state that their connection with BAV is limited to exchange of information and being invited to BAV conferences (John Morris, personal communication). Turkish creationism is certainly more politically *successful* than the US variety.

BAV has lately slowed down slightly in Turkey, because of legal troubles Adnan Oktar encountered due to accusations that his order was using coercive recruiting practices. However, their activity continues, particularly in the area of international outreach. Harun Yahya books, articles, videos and web materials (including complete book texts for free) are now available in English, Malay, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Serbo-Croat (Bosniak), Polish, and Albanian. Translations into Urdu and Arabic were said to be forthcoming at the time of writing. Harun Yahya books are beginning to become available in Islamic bookstores worldwide, especially as English translations are being printed in London, the center of the Islamic publishing world. Browsers in such bookstores, or visitors to web sites like www.hyahya.org, will encounter a rich variety of rationally dubious material by Harun Yahya, including Holocaust denial and Masonic conspiracy theories.

It is no accident that large-scale Islamic creationism originated in Turkey, and that BAV material has first been translated into Western languages rather than languages of the Islamic heartland like Arabic and Urdu. The perceived need for creationism is greatest in partially Westernized countries like Turkey, and in the Muslim immigrant communities in the West – evolutionary ideas have to be widely available first before a religious reaction ensues. In any case, Harun Yahya has become popular throughout the Muslim world; he is no longer just a Turkish phenomenon.

Comparing Creationisms

Islamic creationism is rich in ironies for the external observer. It is bad enough that Islamic countries are notoriously invisible in the world's scientific production, but it now looks like Muslims have to borrow even their pseudosciences from the West. Indeed, the lack of originality in those parts of Turkish creationists' writings which attempt to make scientific points is striking. In most cases they lift their arguments from the Western anti-evolutionist literature, be it young-earth creationism or "Intelligent Design."

Nevertheless, Islamic creationism is not an exact copy of the Protestant version, and the differences are as interesting as the similarities.

✚ In both cases, the most visible form of creationism only gives the illusion of scholarship -- misrepresenting evidence, quoting out of context, using dubious sources etc. However, Islamic creationism enjoys more academic support. Some theologians in major institutions, and even a minority of scientists are sympathetic and publicly supportive of BAV's work. It is as if a number of professors at the Harvard Divinity School were to endorse the ICR.

✚ Again, in both cases, the creationists' primary concern is apologetic and culturally defensive. Creationism is geared to a popular, already religious market. Even so, Islamic creationism is part of very successful re-Islamization movement. Creationists have influenced education policies, and institutions such as BAV are very wealthy and politically well-connected.

✚ Both forms of creationism uses a stereotyped series of arguments: gaps in the fossil record, the second law of thermodynamics precluding evolution, paleontological fraud, the improbability of complex structure, ... But BAV does not copy indiscriminately. They omit flood geology and the obsession with Genesis, and draw heavily on the Islamic tradition of perceiving a harmonious, complex universe as a clear sign of divine creation.

This raises the question of why Muslims would borrow from the Protestants, especially since the social and doctrinal differences between their religions can be quite significant. To form a plausible answer, we have to notice that fundamentalists are *not* religious traditionalists. Islamists, though strict about basic doctrines, have a radically different approach to religious authority and political legitimacy than that in traditional orthodox Islam (Brown 2000). As with the US version, the constituency of Turkish creationists is a modernizing, often technically sophisticated population which affords cognitive authority to science (Eve & Harrold 1991). For this audience, US creationism provides a ready-made populist pseudoscience relatively free of Protestant doctrinal idiosyncrasies. Some slight adaptation to an Islamic context is all that is needed.

An important creationist theme which helps understand the motivation of anti-science efforts is their concern to uphold traditional morality in the face of encroaching modernity. Muslim creationists want to defend a moral order revealed in nature as well as scripture. *Fitra*, or "created nature" is central to traditional Islamic conceptions of morality. Right and wrong is closely linked to the well-defined roles people and life forms have in a specially created universe. Evolution undermines this view of the *nature* of morality: in modern science, biological facts no longer carry immediate moral significance.

Creationism does not exhaust the ways conservative Muslims respond to modern biology. Deploying Islam's own intellectual resources, they occasionally go so far as to resurrect the Aristotelian biology of the Islamic philosophical tradition (Edis & Bix, forthcoming). For example, theologian Süleyman Ates defends traditional sex roles by saying:

It is true that as a whole, the male sex has been created superior to the female. Even the sperm which carries the male sign is different from the female. The male-bearing sperm is more active, ... the female less. The egg stays stationary, the sperm seeks her out, and endures a long and dangerous struggle in the process. Generally in nature, all male animals are more complete, more superior compared to their females. ... Man, being more enduring at work, and superior in prudence and willpower, has been given the duty of protecting woman. (Ates 1991; my translation)

Modern science will simply not give conservative Muslims of any stripe what they want. And a liberal Islam similar to the liberal Christianity which self-consciously avoids challenging modern science is barely existent, at least as a movement with a strong constituency.

Conclusions

It is fairly safe to say that the state of science in the Muslim world is dismal. Academic life is too often strangled between lack of resources and political manipulation, and the wider public realm is an arena where all kinds of pseudoscientific claims have a good shot at drowning out scientific responses. In Muslim countries where modernity has made inroads, public distortions of science are, if anything, more widespread. Though any comparison must be unsatisfyingly impressionistic, the situation defenders of science face is probably considerably worse than in the industrialized West. In particular, religiously inspired objections to mainstream science have, on occasion, found significant political and institutional support in the Muslim world.

The continuing conflicts between science and Islam invite some more speculative reflections as well. It would be a mistake to see the relationship of science and religion in Islamic culture as following the West with a time lag of a few centuries. It is not certain that the institutional and cultural conflicts between Islam and science will be resolved in an accommodation like that of liberal Christianity. If anything, the impressive strength of the Islamic revival of the past few decades suggests otherwise. So "Science vs. Religion" debates may come to have an increasingly Islamic flavor in the coming years.

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