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Evolving Allah

by Nathan Schneider

Can one man succeed in stirring up the Muslim world against Darwin?



“Evolution is not against our God,” says Dr. Ahmad Disi, who has been teaching an introductory evolution class to college students for decades. “Nothing I’ve found in religion is against science, or in science against religion.”

Just down the hall in the biology department at the University of Jordan, one can hear a somewhat different story. Disi’s younger colleague, Dr. Basem Jaber, calls himself a theistic evolutionist; he believes in God and is aware of the overwhelming evidence for evolutionary theory. However, he draws the line at humans. The Qur’an makes clear, to his mind, that the first people were specially created by God, not through a natural process.

“I know for sure where humans came from because of the beliefs that I have,” he says. “I don’t question that.”

When asked separately whether they think their colleagues agree with them, both Disi and Jaber surmise, “Yes, most of them do.”

There is good reason that the two men, each a biologist and a devout Muslim, aren’t aware of their disagreement on the question of human evolution. Compared to the rocky century and a half it has endured in the West since Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, evolution hasn’t caused much commotion in the Muslim world. The

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University of Jordan is unlikely to host a dramatic debate pitting evolution against creationism, as universities often do in the United States. Despite their disagreement, Dr. Jaber carries on his genetic research and Dr. Disi guides others through evolution's mechanics. Disi adds, "I've been teaching this course over a long period of time without having conflicts with our students."

Some Muslims, however, think it's time to see the debate heat up. Most vocal among them today is Harun Yahya, the nom de plume of Adnan Oktar, leader of a small but well-financed international network based in Turkey. Oktar's group publishes more than 250 books, as well as Web sites, videos, and audio lectures, most of which preach against evolution.

The writings of Harun Yahya have attracted considerable attention in Europe and North America, particularly after Oktar sent copies of a series of massive, full-color books called The Atlas of Creation to thousands of scientists, museums, and schools. Three volumes long (so far), with pictures of hundreds of often-mislabeled fossils, it purports to show that God created all species millions of years ago, and that these species have undergone no significant changes since.

In 2007, the Atlas caused the Council of Europe to promulgate a report on "the dangers of creationism in education," even as one of Oktar's many Web sites declared, "The Atlas of Creation razed Darwinism in Europe." Blaming evolution for the evils of terrorism, fascism, and even the recent economic collapse, he believes that Muslims should wage a rhetorical war against it. "It is not a Muslim's duty to 'Islamicize' Darwinism," writes Yahya in Why Darwinism is Incompatible with the Qur'an, "but to overthrow that great lie on the level of ideas and to show the truth of creation."

Oktar and his associates operate under a variety of organizational guises, including the Science Research Foundation (in Europe and Asia) and the Truth Research Foundation (in North America), both of which organize anti-evolution conferences and fossil exhibitions. Together with the Foundation for the Preservation of National Values, a political organization in Turkey, they say their funding comes from members' contributions. An outfit called Global Publishing is responsible for producing and distributing Harun Yahya media. It claims to churn out 18 million books per year, in addition to producing documentary films based on them (using uncredited BBC footage) and maintaining an extensive online presence.

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In May of 2008, a Turkish court sentenced Oktar to three years in jail for “creating an organization with the intent to commit a crime,” a charge he continues to appeal. This is only the latest in a long line of troubles with the law, including a stint in an asylum and charges of drug use, sexual exploitation, and blackmail. He calls all these accusations false, insisting that they come from a Darwinist conspiracy to defame him. Perhaps it is in hopes of generating foreign sympathy that, after years of refusing to grant interviews, Oktar has begun welcoming journalists from far and wide to meet with him.

In October of last year, after receiving an invitation, I flew to Istanbul. I ate dinner with several of his associates, including Global Publishing’s chief of international distribution and the translator who would facilitate the interview. I then was brought to a house on the Asian side of the Bosphorus at around eleven in the evening. The home, borrowed for the occasion from a friend, was not especially large, but finely decorated. Cameras were already in place to record our conversation for Oktar’s Web sites.



We all
took
our
shoes
off
before

entering (*left*). When Oktar arrived, he was wearing a variation of his usual outfit: black slacks, black blazer, and black Versace T-shirt. He greeted me kindly, but had no interest in small talk either before or after the interview. We sat in elegant white upholstered chairs and drank peach juice. He answered my questions in long paragraphs, making clear to me what he sees as the cosmic urgency of his struggle. The translator raced to keep up on his notepad.

“God created Darwinism to test human beings,” he explained.
“Thousands were caught in this godly test, and they failed in this

test. Even a child would not believe in the dictates of Darwinism.”

While those of us in the United States are rather used to theatrical public debates about creationism, for many Muslims, Oktar’s passion comes as a surprise. Cutting the figure of a prophet, he means to call them out of their complacency. He brings to mind, more than any of today’s advocates of creationism or intelligent design in the West, a man named Henry Morris. Beginning in the 1960s, Morris called American Christians to task in the name of young-earth creationism, the belief that the earth has an age measurable in thousands rather than billions of years. After the ignominy suffered at the Scopes trial in 1925, creationist Christians tended toward quietism, and before long, the fear of falling behind the Soviets in science pushed the latest evolutionary synthesis in classrooms more than ever before. Morris, like Oktar, fought back by bringing new life to his interpretation of ancient scripture with alluring pseudoscience. The similarity of the two men is no accident; over the years, Oktar’s Science Research Foundation has collaborated with the Institute for Creation Research, which Morris founded.

Unlike Morris, however, Oktar has no polarizing precedent, no Scopes trial, to draw on in the experience of his part of the world. As Muslims become more aware of modern science, they have found a variety of ways to see it side by side with their religion. Islam, like other major religions, has no single, universal doctrine about evolution. But someone like Adnan Oktar, with a formidable organization and a sense of cosmic mission, could be in a position to change that.

Of all the world’s Muslim-majority countries, none is more ripe for confrontation about a scientific theory than Turkey. It is no accident that someone like Oktar might arise there. Out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the modern nation was founded in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whom Turks still publicly venerate. Atatürk believed that, in order for his country to catch up with advanced European societies, it would have to leave behind old beliefs and customs in order to adopt imported ones.

Almost overnight, he required Turks to change how they dressed, their system of government, and even the way they wrote their language. Islam had been tightly woven into Ottoman politics and society, and he hoped to contain its influence. During these reforms, Turkey developed an avowedly secularist intelligentsia. Evolution became part of the new national, and highly secular, school

curriculum.

By no means did religion disappear in Atatürk's new republic. The majority of Turks continued to practice Sunni Islam, and the government established a Presidency of Religious Affairs to strictly regulate it. Minority religious communities, such as Shia Alevi and Christians, suffered persecution. From the beginning, devout Turks resisted those who wanted to extricate their society from religion. The twentieth century saw a tug-of-war between popular movements with Islamist intentions and secularist bastions in the army and the courts. As recently as 2007, Turkey's supreme court only narrowly voted not to outlaw the country's relatively moderate Islamist ruling party. Strident secularism, which claims to carry the banner of progress and science, persists in tenuous balance with resurgent religious fervor.

In the early years of modern Turkey, among the most influential Islamist voices was that of Bediüzzaman Said Nursî. While embracing the call to modernize, he nevertheless refused to accept that piety should have to be sacrificed in the process. Drawing on Turkey's rich tradition of Sufi mysticism, Nursî's writings combine an intuitive, poetic spirituality with an eager embrace of what he could glean from the science of his day. The intricacy of atomic physics or the dynamics of ecology, for instance, become spellbinding odes to the greatness of their Maker. But later in his career, which lasted until his death in 1960, Nursî came to doubt that science's materialistic method could be reconciled with religion. The theory of evolution, he thought, exemplifies the errors of science unsaddled by faith.

Both the earlier and later threads of Nursî's writings persisted in the inheritor of his mantle in Turkey, Fethullah Gülen. By the early 1970s, as a young preacher for the Presidency of Religious Affairs, Gülen began speaking fervently against evolution. As the years went on, his interests widened, and his following grew. He has represented Islam on the interreligious dialogue circuit, meeting with popes and presidents to further mutual understanding. Today, though living in the United States for political and medical reasons, he is at the center of a vast religious movement in Turkey and across the Turkish diaspora. His followers' priority is education, and they have opened hundreds of schools around the world. The schools' moderate approach to Islam offers a welcome alternative in places like Pakistan, where education for the poor can come with a helping of radical indoctrination.

Gülen, like Nursî, has high hopes for what modern knowledge can promise.

“There is no reason to fear science,” Gülen writes. But he also insists that “those who do not accept religion either are devoid of sound thinking and reasoning or have a wrong conception of knowledge and science.” Western science, he concludes, can only be a force for good when the accumulated wisdom of Islam purifies it. And though evolution is no longer a central concern in his writings, a younger associate named Mustafa Akyol has joined forces with the American intelligent design movement.

When speaking to the Turkish followers of both Gülen and Oktar, one often hears a similar story. Growing up in Atatürk’s Turkey, they were Muslim in name but never felt quite at home in their religion. Often urban, educated, and upwardly mobile, they knew only enough about Islam to make it seem foreign and irrelevant to their lives. Then, usually while at university or through peers, they encountered the teacher or his teachings. Their eyes were opened, and suddenly, Islam spoke clearly to them. For the first time, they understood what they read in the Qur’an. There was no need to leave modern life to find religion. Fatih Sen, a young Turk who represents the Harun Yahya movement in New York City, says that English translations of Yahya books pale in comparison to the original. In Turkish, their prose goes straight “to the heart,” Sen says. Compared to the archaic Ottoman vocabulary used by most Islamist authors, including Nursî and Gülen, Yahya’s language is modern and accessible.

Oktar’s inner circle of 350 or so makes a point of personal style. Calling one another simply “friends,” they eschew the traditional image of a pious Muslim in simple clothes and a long beard for suits more at home in a nightclub than a mosque. Sen explained to me that Muslims should not avoid appearing rich and powerful. Like Muhammad and King Solomon, he said, God’s representatives in the past have been recognized by their personal splendor. With designer clothes, new cars, and iPhones, they act out a lifestyle far out of reach to most Turks. Their ideas about creation science have become yet another way to define a lifestyle that is both modern and Muslim.

The forces of religion and secularism continue to oppose each other on the front page of Turkish newspapers. It is hard to think of a place where the dividing lines between the two are so clear. A top-level secularist conspiracy called Ergenekon has been exposed recently for trying to unseat the ruling Islamist party through a series

of devious crimes. Oktar told me that the same organization is behind numerous attempts to smear his reputation and imprison him. The country is crazy about conspiracy-theory literature, and some of his most popular books tell of Freemason, Zionist, and materialist plots. In their place, Oktar has political designs of his own. He calls for an “Islamic Union” in the Middle East, inspired by the examples of the European Union and the Ottoman Empire. This fits neatly into a series of end-times predictions involving the mythical Islamic figure called the Mahdi, the apocalyptic redeemer of Islam, and a new golden age. Then, he expects, peace will reign while reason and art flourish in the decaying remains of Darwinism.

Oktar himself is no scientist. He studied art and philosophy in his university days and has never worked in a laboratory. Like thousands of others around the world, with a wide variety of different creeds, he is the leader of a religious movement. His followers come to him for the consolations of his presence and his ideas. They don’t need evolution, the way scientists do, as a theoretical basis for biological research. They need it, instead, as a way of understanding why there is so much ugliness in the modern world. As we sat that night in front of the cameras, he told me, “With true science it is possible to make everything even more beautiful.”

One can glean a sense of the beauty Oktar has in mind with a glance through his books, for which he supervises the design himself. In most, the pages are glossy and packed with colorful pictures and photo collages. They portray a bright, magical world of divine order and harmony, with brilliant landscapes, marvelous machines, and every kind of living thing. Nothing is uncertain or ambiguous. Children smile and adults drive expensive cars. In contrast, everything under the influence of Darwinism lives in a shuttered, incoherent darkness. “The author’s books are all extremely convincing,” says The Atlas of Creation’s prefatory note. And, even if only for fleeting moments, I found this to be true.

The morning after meeting Oktar, I visited Dr. Filiz Gürel, a young genetic engineer in the department of molecular biology and genetics at Istanbul University. She once had a postdoctoral fellowship in the United States and now teaches the introductory evolution class. Oktar’s criticisms of evolution simply don’t interest her. “What they say is not scientific,” she told me.



Not



knowing what to do with it, Gürel (*left*) keeps the copy of *The Atlas of Creation* that she received in the mail tucked away under a table, still in its original cardboard box. She considers figures like Oktar and Gülen “suspicious,” and, like a good Turkish secularist, she gives practical reasons for why women shouldn’t be allowed to wear headscarves at the university. Proudly, she showed me around her laboratory and told me about her experiments, which deal with developing new varieties of barley that can be useful for Turkish farmers. Her eyes grew widest and her smile warmest while doing so. At the end of the tour, we passed by a giant picture of an evolutionary tree on the wall.

One of her former colleagues in the department, Haluk Ertan, is among the few Turkish scientists who has mobilized against the Harun Yahya message. “Since I am a strong advocate for free thought on all subjects,” Ertan told me, “we are on opposite sides of the cultural history of man.”

For her part, Gürel believes her lab work gives her plenty to think about already; she doesn’t seem concerned with playing a warrior in the cosmic battle between Allah and Darwin. But, in Oktar’s prophetic vision, that’s what she becomes.

Outside of Turkey’s particular political climate, battles over evolution in Islam are even fewer and farther between. The International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT), based in Herndon, Virginia, and with offices throughout the Middle East, works to “Islamicize” knowledge through academic conferences, publications, and grants. But while the IIIT hopes to infuse an Islamic perspective into the human sciences—economics in particular—evolutionary biology doesn’t trouble them.

Dr. Fathi Malkawi, a former executive director of the organization, told me, “I don’t take the debate between evolutionists and creationists seriously. I’m not concerned much about it.” Dr. Malkawi once oversaw the textbooks used by Jordanian schools, which covered evolution even as they occasionally assured students of God’s presence in the process. Leaving the science itself untouched, these remarks were “to make the students aware,” he explains, “that [evolution] is not something contradicting their belief.”

As Muslim countries continue to play catch-up with Western science, more and more people are asking what relationship Islamic civilization, broadly conceived, has or should have to scientific endeavors.

On one side of the debate, modernist Muslims have long celebrated their religion’s appetite for inquiry. “Seek knowledge even in China,” exhorted Muhammad. They recall the great physicians and astronomers of the medieval Islamic empires as role models that can inspire future generations. They comb through scripture for passages that seem to presage the latest cutting-edge discoveries, in fields from cosmology to embryology. “When you look at the Qur’an,” Adnan Oktar assured me, “it encourages scientific research in all areas because the Qur’an and the religion of Islam know that science is for the good of humanity.” With God as creator, after all, what should religion have to fear from science? Every path of inquiry, properly followed, will surely end with Him.

Others are less optimistic. Taner Edis, a Turkish physicist who teaches in the United States, warns that Islam is more likely to distort science than to encourage it. The title of his book, *An Illusion of Harmony*, gives a good sense of how he thinks about the Muslim modernists’ arguments. Edis, as well as the Pakistani physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy, has argued that the development of cutting-edge research science in Muslim countries will require a new willingness to question religious traditions and habits of religious practice. They point to figures in the history of Islamic thought, particularly the eleventh-century theologian al-Ghazali, who asserted the precedence of god’s will over any natural law that science might seek to discover. With good reason, they question the practice of treating the Qur’an as a science textbook. On the side of these skeptics, also, is the disappointing performance of scientific research in Muslim countries. While Israel, according to a 1997 study, contributed 0.89 percent of the world’s scientific publications, twenty of its Arab neighbors combined accounted for only 0.55 percent.

To be sure, there is more at play than religion. Most Muslim countries lag behind in terms of education and economic development generally. To make matters worse, on average they spend only 0.3 percent of their gross national products on scientific research, compared to a global average of 2.4 percent. The new, lavishly-funded research universities emerging in officially devout places like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states will help test whether wealth alone is enough to jump-start science.

In reality, no sweeping statement can tell the whole story of what Islam means for the future of science. So also in the West: efforts to draw clean lines between science and religion run aground when one recalls Isaac Newton's passion for esoteric readings of the Bible, or the evangelical forays of Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project. Admiration for God's intelligent design drove English parsons to spend their spare time collecting data that Darwin later used to support his theory of natural selection. Similarly, the splendid images that accompany the erroneous science in Harun Yahya's books might inspire a new generation of Muslims to enter the laboratory and learn the real thing.

Discovery works in mysterious ways, with surprising motivations.

When I had the chance to speak with Oktar, I raised the kinds of questions I would ask anyone with a deep interest in science. What did he think are the great unanswered questions? How can we encourage more pure research? Has he ever believed anything about which later discoveries caused him to change his mind?

Oktar didn't bite. While not opposed to further scientific investigation, he doesn't see the urgency of it since, concerning evolution, "the proofs we have in our hands right now suffice."

In our conversation, it seemed only one field of study struck his fancy. "It is a very good idea," he said, "that we have a scientific branch which specifically deals with the existence of supernatural beings," such as angels and genies. In a world brimming with particle accelerators, orbital telescopes, and gene sequencers, each offering new knowledge of nature just around the bend, I found it difficult to sympathize with Oktar's priorities.



It would be a shame to let Oktar (*left*) and his ilk succeed in replicating the



West's tiresome evolution controversies across the Muslim world, where other ways of thinking about religion and science are still possible.

Among both the intelligentsia and the general public, some Muslims accept evolution and some don't. For the most part, when I raised the issue with people in the Middle East, they were interested in learning more, in seeking knowledge "even in China." But good science education is still hard to come by in the region, and meanwhile books by Harun Yahya and others freely take advantage of well-meaning curiosity.

Dr. Moneef Zou'bi, who serves as director general of the Jordan-based Islamic World Academy of Sciences, reminded me not to think about evolution within Islam the way I learned to in the American context.

"Yes, we think about it, and we develop our own opinions," he explained. "I don't think we are as passionate about these things as our fellow human beings in the West are, frankly speaking."

His organization promotes science education and encourages political leaders to devote more resources to scientific research according to the highest international standards. But he doubts that, as it develops, the Muslim world will need to repeat the West's struggles over evolution.

"Arabs have always been very famous traders, historically," he says. "And traders, by nature, tend to be easy-going." Because of their past, he suspects, "people in this part of the world can be comfortable in adopting two schools of thought on certain controversial issues."

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