

AN ATTEMPT TO DESCRIBE ISLAMIC CREATIONISM[#]

Andya Primanda

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ABSTRACT

Creationism as a religious attempt to provide an alternative to Darwin's theory of evolution is usually associated with literalist Christians. An Islamic version of creationism has emerged recently in the form of books and films authored by Harun Yahya. This paper tries to give a description of Harun Yahya's creationist views and its position in reference to other forms of creationism.

Key words: creationism; evolution; Harun Yahya; Islam; religion and science

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I. INTRODUCTION

The question of origins has been an important part in various religions and philosophies. Every tribe and civilization has their own creation stories. Later came the major world religions, each with their own account of how things came to be as described in their sacred texts. These beliefs form some of the basic premises upon religious doctrines stand. Religion-based creation stories came to replace tribal myths as proselytizers converted local peoples into their religion.

With the advent of modern science, people began to understand nature by the rules and procedures of the scientific method instead of revelation and religious authority. Early scientists sought to comprehend nature by direct observation, and they start to describe how nature works in scientific hypotheses and theories. Through science, people discovered that the Earth is spherical instead of flat, and it revolves around the Sun instead of vice versa. The origins of life's diversity were also re-examined through scientific methods, and evolution emerged as a scientific answer to that question.

II. EVOLUTION

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) is usually referred as the milestone work in which evolution became accepted to be the scientific explanation of the origins of life's diversity. However, Darwin's work can also be viewed as a synthesis of earlier works in natural history, such as Linnaeus' attempt to classify living things into hierarchical categories, geologists' discovery of fossils of ancient life-forms and the long age of the Earth, animal and plant

breeders' knowledge of variation and inheritance, Richard Owen's observation of homologies, and Thomas Malthus' argument of population increase. Darwin combined earlier findings with the evidence he gathered to develop several theories to explain the origin of life's diversity through natural means, which he collectively referred as "descent with modification" or better known as "evolution". Darwin pointed out that forms of life has changed over time, as documented by the fossil record, and proposed his theory of evolution by means of natural selection to explain how living things change over time. There is variation among individuals of a species, which generates a difference in individual fitness. In the struggle for existence, those unfit will be likely to leave offspring that carries their less favourable traits, while those fit will survive and leave more offspring that has their advantageous traits. This process of variation and subsequent natural selection results in change in the population's characters over time; the population can be said to have evolved.

Subsequent discoveries in various fields strengthened the case for evolution. Radiometric dating confirmed the geologists' postulate of the long age of the Earth, and Darwin's assertions of the existence of transitional forms were confirmed with the discovery of many fossils of transitional life forms with intermediate characters. The science of genetics supplied a major part missing from Darwin's original proposal, the source of variation. By the mid-twentieth century the scientific world has unanimously accepted evolution as a well-supported explanation of the origin of life's diversity.

III. CREATIONISM AND ITS VARIANTS

While most scientists and some theologians of Darwin's time eagerly accepted his discoveries, certain groups of religious believers feel that evolution is a threat to faith. These groups are known as **creationists**, and their way of thinking **creationism**, which reflect their belief that the universe and living things originate from specific acts of divine creation. Creationists are found in several major religions, from which they derive their interpretation of origins. The similarity among creationists of every religious stripe lies in their opposition to evolution.

The Catholic Church (see Pope John Paul II Message to Pontifical Academy of Sciences, October 22, 1996) and several denominations of Christianity have no qualms over accepting evolution. Nevertheless, certain interpretations of the Bible, especially a literal reading of Genesis, do run up against the evolutionary account of origins. Christianity-inspired opposition against evolution is particularly prominent in the US, dating back to the 1920s when John Scopes, a schoolteacher, was put to trial for teaching evolution in class. American Biblical literalists had been struggling to ban the teaching of evolution and/or propose an alternative, *creation-science*; but this move so far had been judged as violating the US constitution as it promotes a certain religion. There are several versions of creationism, described in the following paragraphs.

1. Young-Earth Creationism (YEC)

Young-Earth Creationism is the oldest version of American Christian creationism. Its beliefs come from a strict literal reading of the Bible, which could be expressed as follows:

- Sudden creation of the universe from nothing
- Separate creation of kinds of life
- The insufficiency of mutation and natural selection to induce major evolutionary changes. Changes are only within fixed limits of "created kinds"
- Separate ancestry of humans and apes
- A young age of the earth, about 6,000-10,000 years old as calculated from biblical genealogies
- The factual occurrence of a literal six-day creation week as described in Genesis
- The factual occurrence of Noah's deluge as a worldwide flood

By far the YEC view has been the most popular version of creationism in the US. Its most well-known promoters are the US-based organizations Institute of Creation Research (ICR) and Answers in Genesis. Biblical inerrancy is paramount to YECs. They believe that all parts of the Bible, interpreted literally, could not be wrong if it is to be considered a guidebook of faith and morals. Consequently they reject not only evolution, but also parts of geology and cosmology which they saw as contradicting Genesis. They maintain that the factuality of Genesis is crucial to Christian belief, as it lies at the heart of the doctrine of Adam's Fall and Original Sin, which themselves become the prerequisite for Christ, the Saviour.

2. Old-Earth Creationism (OEC) and Intelligent Design (ID)

Another group of creationists accept the great age of the earth as discovered by geology, but keep their anti-evolution position. Their beliefs are quite the same with YECs, minus the young age of the earth. In recent years, they are more known by the name of the Intelligent Design (ID) movement. Proponents of ID held that humans and other living things are 'intelligently designed' by God, in separate acts of creation. Like YECs they say that the natural forces of mutation and natural selection cannot account for the diversity of life, and living things show signs of having been designed by an Intelligent Designer. The most prominent figures in the ID movement are the law professor Philip Johnson and mathematician William Dembski.

An interesting side of ID is that some of its proponents refuse to equate the Intelligent Designer with the Christian God. This can be viewed as a tactical move to avoid the constitutional problem encountered by YECs in their effort to insert their views into American schools.

3. Theistic Evolution (TE)

The position of theistic evolution (TE) does not exactly fit into the strict creationist category, for theistic evolutionists do not reject evolution. For them evolution is how God created life. Almost all theistic biologists fall into this category, and some of its outspoken proponents are cell biologist Kenneth Miller, microbiologist Richard Lenski, and biologist/theologian Arthur Peacocke.

While most theistic evolutionists accept the scientific account of evolution, biochemist

Michael Behe asserted that some complex structures found in living things, which he dubbed as 'Irreducible Complexity (IC)', could not be formed through evolution. Behe declared this insufficiency of naturalistic evolution to invoke the argument of intelligent design to explain the existence of IC. However, unlike YECs and ID proponents, Behe does not reject the theory of common descent, including the common ancestry of humans and apes.

4. Other Forms of Creationism

There are two other forms of creationism worth mentioning. Both are not based on Christianity.

Vedic creationism derives its beliefs from the Vedas, scriptures of Hinduism. Its principles include the usual anti-evolution arguments, but its distinction lies in the view of a cyclical history of the world. Vedic creationists held that the universe is infinite and constant throughout time, and living things had always been what they are now. In *Forbidden Archaeology* and other books, Vedic creationist Michael Cremo tried to support this position by attempting to prove that humans have existed throughout time, even at millions of years ago when science said that humans had not appeared on earth.

Raelian creationism is advanced by the Raelians, a large cult of space alien worshippers who recently make headlines with their claim of having cloned a human being. Like other creationists they believe that evolution is a falsehood; however, Raelians believe that life forms are the product of extra-terrestrial intelligent designers. They say the supposed chain of transitional forms, like the one documenting the change from ancient ape to modern human, is actually recording the progress of the alien intelligent designers, creating a series of prototypes with ever-increasing sophistication. Interestingly, Raelians said that the aliens that created humans are called Elohim, which is also known as the biblical God, and they claim that the miracles in the Bible are actually extraterrestrial interventions.

IV. ISLAMIC CREATIONISM

Like Christians, Muslims as a whole had a mixed response to evolution. This vague attitude might be caused by the fact that the Qur'an did not provide a detailed and ordered account of creation like Genesis. The Qur'anic verses that refer to the creation of the universe

and life are scattered throughout the book, and most consist of general comments such as "Praise be to God who created the heavens and the earth (Q6:1)" or "Read in the name of your Lord who has created; He created man from a clot (Q96:1--2)". The Qur'an contains the story of Adam's temptation and banishment from the Garden, but it did not end with humankind's fall from grace because Adam had been forgiven (Q2:31--37, 20:115--122). Also, the Qur'an does not specifically indicate separate creation of kinds of living things. On the other hand, the Qur'an repeatedly asserts that there are verses of God in nature, and humans are told to study them to complement the revealed verses (Q2:164, 3:190). Some Qur'anic verses challenge humans to use their own senses and intellectual facilities to understand nature, and "observe how the creation was initiated (Q29:20)". These scriptural premises inspired some Muslim thinkers of the past to speculate on how the process of creation took place.

Nowadays, while some Muslims have no problem in accepting the scientific account of evolution, others see it as being incompatible with their interpretation of the Islamic creation story. The latter group developed a creationist view quite similar with Christian creationism. In recent times, Islamic creationism is spearheaded by the Turkish organization led by Harun Yahya.

Harun Yahya is the pen-name of Adnan Oktar, a religiously inspired writer who authored many works in various topics. When he was studying fine arts at Mimar Sinan University, he started confronting evolution, which he perceived as the scientific basis for the materialist-secularist ideology in Turkey. In his various works, he relates evolution to Marxism, communism, atheism, fascism, capitalism, terrorism, and everything else that's wrong with the world--quite similar to Christian creationists. In almost every book Harun Yahya wrote, there is a final chapter dedicated to criticize evolution.

The Harun Yahya creationist movement, unlike its Christian counterparts in the US, does not confine itself into one country. Their views quickly spread throughout the Muslim world. Harun Yahya's lavishly illustrated works had been translated into various languages and published in many countries.

The Evolution Deceit (2001) could be considered Harun Yahya's flagship title for creationism. Here are the main points of Harun Yahya creationism as described in *The Evolution Deceit*:

- Separate creation and immutability of kinds of life
- Disability of mutation and natural selection to produce new kinds
- The fossil record does not document evolutionary change and contains no transitional forms
- Impossibility of abiogenesis (the emergence of life from lifeless matter)
- Complexity as evidence of intelligent design
- The material world is an illusion

Islamic beliefs do not specify a young age of the earth, and some Harun Yahya works seem to endorse the scientific account of the origin of the universe (particularly the Big Bang theory), therefore it can be said that they do not agree with the YEC position. The acceptance of the long age of the earth and the first four points mentioned in the list makes their position similar to Old-Earth/Intelligent Design creationism.

The last point on the list, the statement that the material world is only an illusion, is unique to Harun Yahya creationism. However, the fact that it is included in almost all Harun Yahya works indicates that for them it is as important as their attacks to evolution. Harun Yahya stated that matter, which means everything physical in the world we live in, is just an illusion created in our brain, and it does not actually exist. This position is quite unorthodox within Islamic doctrines. It is possible that this matter-as-illusion notion is a theological response to Turkish state ideology of materialism and secularism.

Edis (1994) noted that in the 1980s Turkish creationists asked ICR for assistance of creationist books, and ICR members spoke in conferences organized by the Harun Yahya organization. However, this does not necessarily mean that Islamic creationism is just an American import. People in the Harun Yahya organization have denied direct links with Christian creationism on various occasions.

Harun Yahya's views encountered little resistance as it proliferates across the Muslim world. Many Muslims hailed his views as an example of harmonizing science and religion. Others praise him for his bravery in attacking the Western science establishment that is evolution and its counterparts, materialism and atheism. The use of Harun Yahya material as part of da'wah (proselytizing) is increasing, and there had been cases of schoolteachers sympathizing with Harun Yahya views using

his creationist works as educational resources. While the advance of Christian creationists in the US had been held in check by scientists and other groups, Harun Yahya creationism had greater success in delivering their message to a larger crowd. It remains to be seen whether creationism will eventually become a part of mainstream Islamic belief.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Until now, creationists, whether YEC, ID, Harun Yahya, or others, tend to concentrate their energy and resources in attacking evolution. Their books, articles, and films mostly contain the following arguments: claiming absence of evidence for evolution, criticizing certain theories of evolution, quoting scientists' comments which they thought as expressing doubt or dissatisfaction with evolution, and associating evolution with things creationists do not like such as atheism or loss of moral values, with the occasional proposal to modify the methodological naturalism which dictates how science works. However, they also have the burden of developing an alternative scientific theory to account for those facts currently explained by the theory of evolution. In order for creationism to be considered as evolution's legitimate competitor for the scientific explanatory theory of the origin of life's diversity, it must start building its own testable hypotheses and theories, instead of just taking shots at evolution. So far there had been little progress in the development of a theory of creationism. Several problems that need to be addressed by a theory of creationism are:

- determining the limits of created kinds (example question "Does one act of separate creation produce only one species of bird, or does the whole order of birds appeared as a result of one act of separate creation?")
- proving the inability of mutation and natural evolution to produce major "macroevolutionary" changes ("Is there any observable mechanism that would prevent a variable species to evolve into another species?")
- explaining the pattern of hierarchical similarity found in the classification ("If the groups within the mammalian class were separately created, why do they share many similarities?")
- explaining the existence of fossils thought to be intermediate forms ("If humans and apes were created separately, why do we found the likes

of *Homo erectus* and *Australopithecus* in the fossil record?")

- explaining the existence of homologies, vestigial organs, imperfections, and other aspects of biology which is thought to provide evidence of evolutionary origins ("Why do human embryos develop a yolk sac if they are not descendants of egg-laying reptiles?")

These are the problems that must be tackled by those who aspire to replace evolution with creationism. The merits of any scientific theory must be judged by how well it explains facts of nature, and if creationism could explain the facts better than evolution, then consequently scientists would have to dispose of Darwin's theory of evolution in favour of creationism. Creationism still has a lot of work to do if it wants to replace evolution.

Finally, the whole case of evolution versus creationism could be viewed as an ongoing episode in humankind's intellectual struggle to come to terms with the reality of nature. In the attempt to understand nature, science has discovered a lot of things that do not easily fit into people's cherished religious interpretations. For a long time the question of origins had one all-purpose answer for the religious: "God did it." Now science has attempted to describe the process of how life got into its present condition, and it is up to believers whether they would like to add the details to "God did it."

POSTSCRIPT

In his comment on this paper's presentation, Professor John Haught disagrees with my categorization of Michael Behe as a theistic evolutionist, given Behe's affiliation with the antievolution movement. At present I am still withholding judgement about whether I should revise my classification, but I believe my claim that Behe accepts parts of mainstream evolutionary theory still stand.

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