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Book review

## Emergence of the Islamic creationists

**Darwinism Refuted.** By Harun Yahya [pseudonym]. Goodword Books, New Delhi, 2003. 376 pp., \$9.95 paperback.

**The Evolution Deceit.** By Harun Yahya [pseudonym]. Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd, Istanbul, 1997. 280 pp., \$13.25 paperback.

“Creationist” probably invokes an image of an American evangelical protestant Christian, but American creationists do not have the corner on the mis-information market. There is a growing movement of creationism that is truly global, and the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam seem to be leading the way (Branch, 2002). In Turkey, for example, Islamic creationism has gained considerable momentum and Islamic-flavored creationism is taught alongside biological evolution, if evolution is taught at all (in the US this is analogous to “equal-time” for Biblical creationism). Indeed, instead of creationists fighting for time in education, Turkish biologists are fighting to have evolution included in secondary school curricula (Koenig, 2001). I am not implying that all Muslims are creationists. The same degree of literalism associated with Biblical interpretations is seen with the Qur’an (Alnoor, 2002).

At the moment, the most popular Islamic creationist is Adnan Oktar, a Turkish author who writes under the pen name Harun Yahya. Two of his recent books, *Darwinism Refuted* and *Evolution Deceit*, are flagrantly anti-evolutionary and implicitly anti-science. By creationist standards, these two books are very slick, with glossy pages, copious illustrations (photo credits are not given), and are accompanied by a well-designed webpage (<http://www.harunyahya.com>) where these books, among others, can be downloaded for free.

Despite the fanfare, Yahya’s message in both books is the same: the process of evolution has not and cannot occur. The concept persists through the concerted efforts of the agenda-driven media and scientific community. *The Evolution Deceit* is peppered with excerpts from the Qur’an and focuses on “exposing” evolution’s scandals (e.g., Piltdown Man) and the apparent materialistic

agenda of the evolutionists. *Darwinism Refuted* asserts that it is geared to more ‘advanced’ readers than *The Evolution Deceit*, but neither book is very technical and both rely on a scientifically naïve reader. In keeping with the creationist tradition, these books are more about criticizing evolution than supporting creationism. Such a tactic, and most of Yahya’s arguments, are principally taken from Biblical creationists’ sources. Consequently, rebuttals of many of Yahya’s arguments can readily be found in Futuyma (1983) and Godfrey (1984). For this review, I will address Yahya’s most glaring mistakes, omissions, and logical inconsistencies.

Yahya claims that evolution lacks a mechanism, and attempts to dispose of natural selection and mutation as potential agents. As evidence of the non-existence of natural selection, Yahya cites Wynne-Edwards’ (1965) suggestion that animals self-regulate their own populations and there is no competition for food. Wynne-Edwards’ hypothesis of group selection is controversial and may be limited to specific circumstances but if Wynne-Edwards was correct, it only changes the level of selection from individuals to groups (Sober and Wilson, 1998). Yahya ignores other factors that may influence natural selection, such as predation, fecundity, differences in life-span, and competition for mates or pollinators. Perhaps most damning to Yahya’s assertion is that natural selection can be detected in the wild (e.g., Johannesson et al., 1995).

Mutations are presented as only being harmful because, as Yahya claims, organisms were created perfectly and have remained so. This purely religious perspective is slightly different from the claims of the Biblical literalists, which purport a degradation of perfection soon after creation (<http://www.icr.org/pubs/imp/imp-085.htm>). Because perfection is given without context it is difficult to know what aspect of the organism is being alluded to, but if organisms were created perfectly then one must wonder why so many species have gone extinct. Despite Yahya’s claims that “no useful mutation has been so far observed” (*Darwinism Refuted*, p. 28) there are various examples of beneficial mutations that were inexcusably missed by Yahya, such as those documented by Bull et al. (2000) and Imhof and Schlotterer (2001).

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Several chapters in *Darwinism Refuted* are devoted to discussing a lack of evolutionary intermediates in the fossil record, or rejecting specimens that were thought of as candidates. For example, Yahya makes the claim that “the fossil record is quite complete, and it clearly reveals that creatures from the Cambrian Age did not have ancestors” (2003, p. 62). Amazingly, there is no mention of the Ediacara or other Neoproterozoic fossils that may potentially be ancestral to Cambrian species. Yahya claims that some transitions are impossible for ecological or physiological reasons. For example, Yahya claims that the transition to land is impossible because “If amphibian eggs were laid on land, they would immediately dry out, killing the embryo.” This, of course, completely ignores several salamanders (e.g., *Desmognathus aeneus*) and anurans (e.g., *Thoropa lutzi*, all *Eleutherodactylus* spp.) that do this very thing (see Duellman and Trueb, 1986).

A chapter of *Darwinism Refuted* is relegated to the claim that the Second Law of Thermodynamics precludes evolution and the origin of life. Yahya makes the standard mistake of failing to differentiate between open and closed systems, but this argument is also fallacious, because complexity is predicted from evolution not only at the level of phenotype (McShea, 1994), but also at the level of genetic systems (Edelman and Gally, 2001). Yahya employs numerous statistics to support his objection to a natural explanation to the origin of life. The evolution of life may indeed be unlikely but it nonetheless happened (Kluge, 2002). Furthermore, the statistical inference of history may be questioned on the grounds that historical events are unique, and in the case of species they are necessarily unique (Kluge, 2002, 2003).

Yahya transparently misrepresents homology as ‘a tautological argument, advanced on the bases of no other evidence than an apparent physical resemblance’ (2003, p. 228). This, of course, ignores the transformation series concept of character as evidence of species relationships (Hennig, 1966; see also Grant and Kluge, 2004)! As part of his discussion of homology, Yahya declares, “The myth of human-chimp similarity is dead” (2003, p. 239). Yahya compares the similarity in DNA sequences between humans and chimpanzee (given as 98% to 99%) and shows the similarity of genes, not sequences, between humans and nematodes as 75%, and presents these figures as comparable. Yahya claims that from these figures there is no molecular evidence of common ancestry. Phenetics aside, similarity is a relativistic term that requires at least three points of reference (Kluge, 2003). In the same chapter, Yahya makes the claim that DNA analysis (= phylogeny), does not ‘agree with any evolutionist family tree’ (2003, p. 238). As evidence, he cites six studies in *Darwinism Refuted* (2003), but none were published after 1986. The argument appears to be that an unresolved “universal” phylogeny is evidence to reject evolution but the logic that led to this conclusion is not presented. What does

creationism have to say about resolving relationships? Without knowing how a supernatural being goes about creating, is it possible to construct a hypothesis?

*Darwinism Refuted* includes a chapter devoted to the newest creationist darling: intelligent design. The proponents of intelligent design argue that apparently irreducible complex systems cannot, or are unlikely to, have evolved because the component parts do not function in isolation. Examples of intelligently designed objects are eyes and ears and, the now ubiquitous example, flagella. The most important book of the intelligent design movement is *Darwin’s Black Box* (Behe, 1998; rebuttals can be found in Ussery, 1999 and Pennock, 2001). Another facet of intelligent design is the supposition that information in the form of DNA cannot be generated from natural processes. Yahya uses a number of quotes to suggest that the information content of DNA is not a material-based property, but instead ascribes it mystical qualities.

Earlier, I asserted that Yahya’s books are anti-science. Creationists presume to have absolute truth, such that empirical evidence cannot falsify their knowledge claims. Because their knowledge is absolute, there is no encouragement to test and explore areas that would conflict with supposedly known assertions. In other words, there is no pursuit of objective knowledge (*sensu* Popper, 1959) and no need for science. Further, Yahya is a philosophical idealist and sees the world as ‘only a collection of images created to test man’ (1997, p. 232). Ironically, this presents Yahya with an interesting dilemma. If the observable world suggests creation, as he insists throughout his books, and there is a deceiving entity ruling the universe, then creation must be a deception.

Creationists world-wide are becoming increasingly aggressive in their push to introduce their ideas into the public arena and, in too many instances, they have become successful (Scott & Branch, 2003). The lesson for working scientists is that we should not ignore the well-funded and highly motivated creationists. Therefore, responding to creationists is important not just in public debates but also in the primary literature, so those striving for excellence in science education can cite such works. Indeed, Yahya challenges evolutionists to respond to “scientific findings” (2003, p. 11) that supposedly refute evolution, which, according to Yahya, “is nothing but a deceit...based not on science but brainwashing, propaganda, and fraud” (1997, p. 192). The readers and contributors of *Cladistics* should be more than qualified to meet this threat by publicly responding, and I urge them to do so.

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