

Responses to Darwin in the Religious Traditions

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MUSLIM HERMENEUTICS AND ARABIC VIEWS OF EVOLUTION

by *Marwa Elshakry*

Abstract. Over the last century and a half, discussions of Darwin in Arabic have involved a complex intertwining of sources of authority. This paper reads one of the earliest Muslim responses to modern evolution against those in more recent times to show how questions of epistemology and exegesis have been critically revisited. This involved, on the one hand, the resuscitation of long-standing debates over claims regarding the nature of evidence, certainty, and doubt, and on the other, arguments about the use (and limits) of reason in relation to scripture. Categories of knowledge and belief, alongside methods of scriptural hermeneutics, were repositioned in the process, transforming the meaning and discursive reach of the former as much as the latter. Indeed, this paper argues that the long-run engagement with Darwin in Arabic led to the mutual transformation of both "science" and "religion," whether as objects of knowledge (and belief) or as general discursive formations.

Keywords: authority; belief; doubt; epistemology; evolution; exegesis; hermeneutics; Islam; science; theology

In what follows I should like to explore how it was that, through debates over Darwin, many Muslim thinkers effected a repositioning of theological and exegetical approaches. I will do this schematically by focusing on one of the earliest Arabic accounts of modern evolutionary theory written by

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a Muslim theologian: an 1887 treatise published by a little-known Syrian scholar and Sufi called Ḥusayn al-Jisr. This work dealt extensively with the ideas and proofs of modern evolutionary theories from the perspective of Muslim theology and logic, and as such it demonstrates the complex intertwining of theological sources of authority with modern scientific claims that took place in modern Arabic works of this vein. It also tracks the beginnings of what would prove to be the mutually transformative nature of post-classical Muslim hermeneutics and a modern scientific epistemology in Arabic. In this paper, this text will also serve as a kind of foil to contemporary discussions, and hence as a means to highlight the powerfully salient impact on ideas of changing socio-intellectual and geo-political contexts.

A HAMIDIAN TREATISE

One of the first extensive Muslim treatments of modern evolutionary theories was published in the late nineteenth century under the seemingly unrelated title *al-Risālah al-Hamīdīyah fī ḥaqīqat al-diyānah al-Islāmīyah wa-ḥaqīqat al-sharī'ah al-Muḥammadiyah*, or *A Hamidian Treatise on the Truthfulness of Islam and of the Sharī'ah*. The author of the 1887 treatise was Ḥusayn al-Jisr, a Sunni scholar from Tripoli (in what is now Lebanon).

Although he is little remembered today, al-Jisr was a prominent religious figure in Ottoman Syria who mentored a number of extremely influential Muslim scholars, including the Syrian reformer and key intellectual figure Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (to whom I will return briefly later). He also acquired the title of head of a Sufi order in Tripoli from his father (who had himself achieved local renown as a miracle-worker): this was the *Khalwatīyah tarīqa* [brotherhood or order], by then one of the more prominent brotherhoods in the Ottoman Syrian provinces, and sponsor of novel intellectual and social movements in the region from at least the eighteenth century, including the renewal of interest in both Arabic and Persian works of Muslim logic and theology (Gran 1979; Rouayheb 2006); this was an influence, as we will see later, that can also be felt in al-Jisr's treatise.

The *Risālah* ran to nearly 400 pages, and despite the fairly technical discussions included in this weighty tome, it was widely acclaimed in its day, attracting commentary and praise from Muslims all over the world. Even the revolutionary pan-Islamist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani gave a nod of recognition to al-Jisr's stature when he dubbed him the "Asharī of our times." The *Risālah* also won the Syrian Sufi and *shaykh* an Imperial prize from the Ottoman Sultan, Sultan Abdülhamid, for whom the work was named (Jisr 1887, 1933, u). Yet al-Jisr's choice of title had not been mere functional loyalism: Abdülhamid was a key proponent of the new Muslim reformism, and he was keen to sponsor works that aided his project of institutional reforms and Islamic intellectual revival (Commins 1990). This

was something that al-Jisr was also keen to help along. In fact, he was a key figure in what we might broadly call a modernist reconfiguration of Muslim categories of knowledge (and belief), one that influenced a growing number of theological and juridical movements in the late nineteenth century.

As socio-political transformations often precede epistemological ones, it may be helpful to begin here with issues of context, namely the institutional and socio-intellectual background to the authorship of, and audience for, al-Jisr's text. Al-Jisr had been an influential *'alim* who studied at *al-Azhar* before returning to his native Tripoli. He had been involved with a number of noted Muslim reformers who were beginning to express a keen interest in new subjects of study, and particularly the modern arts and sciences coming from Europe and elsewhere. As a pedagogue, al-Jisr believed it was essential to found new schools offering instruction in the modern sciences alongside the more traditional religious sciences and that they be run by men such as himself who could compete with those of foreign missionaries and others. Like so many Muslim religious scholars or *'ulama* at that time, al-Jisr was greatly distressed by what he saw as the challenges the missionary schools posed—in particular that by offering new subjects of study (and especially the modern sciences) these foreign schools had managed to draw large numbers of Muslim students away from the tutelage of scholars such as al-Jisr (Ebert 1991, 84). As a result, he joined a group of Ottoman Syrian notables who banded together to form a charitable society named the *Jam'iyat al-Maqāṣid al-Khayriyah al-Islāmiyah* (Jam'iyat al-Maqāṣid al-Khayriyah al-Islāmiyah, c. 1950). It was through this group, in fact, that al-Jisr found himself in Beirut in 1882—the year of Darwin's death and, more importantly, the year in which a highly vituperative public controversy over Darwin erupted in a missionary college there (al-Jisr 1933, b). Al-Jisr was then teaching at a new school for boys that the *Maqāṣid* had set up.

Ironically, it was the Protestant missionaries at the college who were both responsible for the broader dissemination of Darwin's ideas and the first public opposition to them in Ottoman Muslim lands (Faraḡ 1972; Juha 2004; Meier 1996). College leaders in 1882 found one of their own senior teachers guilty of the charge of corrupt beliefs when he delivered a speech in Arabic commending Darwin as a paragon of modern science. Al-Jisr, himself was a close observer of these events during his stay in Beirut and the controversy must have been in the back of his mind when he composed his *Risālah* with its emphasis on Islam's potential (the contrast with Christianity was implied but unmistakable) for reasoned or rational assessment of modern evolutionary claims.

Al-Jisr was not only an avid reader of the new Arabic press; he was also among the first Ottoman Syrian *'alim* to turn to the printing press as an instrument for the dissemination of ideas. Al-Jisr used the press as a means

of combating contemporary critics of Islam—from European orientalists and imperial officials to local materialists. Indeed, his *Risālah* was primarily composed as just such a public proclamation in defense of the faith.

EVOLUTIONARY DIALECTICS: SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND HERMENEUTICS

At first glance al-Jisr's treatise does not appear to be about evolution or even about the modern sciences at all. Shaped by the desire to counter then-current misconceptions of Islam in the West, the work starts with a long discussion of the basic tenets and practices of Islam. Unfolding his material in roughly chronological order, al-Jisr then describes what he labeled as the eight major challenges to the faith, beginning with those who had immediately rebutted the Prophetic message of Muhammad in the seventh century CE, and ending with the "atheist-materialist-naturalists" (*al-ṭabī'iyūn al-maddīyūn al-dabrīyūn*).

It is in his discussion of this last group that we see how al-Jisr's ideas were shaped by current debates over evolution. One of the protagonists in the Darwin controversy at the Syrian Protestant College had been a pupil—later a founding father of Arab socialist thought—called Shibli Shumayyil. Al-Jisr had clearly been reading Shumayyil's articles in the local mission press because his discussion of materialism drew extensively on Shumayyil's and on the Arabic science journal in which he wrote. His description of evolution in the *Risālah*, for instance, is partly a verbatim extract taken from the journal. And when in this section—by far the longest in the book—a dialectical dialogue between an evolutionary materialist and a Muslim is staged, the former sounds suspiciously like Shumayyil himself (al-Jisr, [1887] 1905, 115–245).

But when al-Jisr referred to the materialists he did not only have Shumayyil in mind. In fact, he not only used Shumayyil's neologism *al-māddīyūn* (literally "matter-ists") to refer to them, but also attached to it other more long-standing terms—*dabrīyūn* and *ṭabī'iyūn*. In the case of the former, this had been historically used to refer to atomists, pantheists, dualists, subjective idealists, or others who might deny the reality of a metaphysical world governed under God's jurisdiction (such as, in the classic case, the Manicheans). In the case of the latter, this was the term that classical figures such as al-Ghazālī and others used when debating the naturalist views of the philosophers, whether the Ancients or contemporary Muslims. In short, his choice of terminology reflected the fact that al-Jisr—like so many other Muslims at the time—felt that Darwin's theory of evolution was really "nothing new." While he was willing to engage with and indeed accommodate the rational findings of a modern view of evolution, therefore, he saw this as merely the latest incarnation of the much older, historic challenge of a heterodox and materialist view of a

divinely ordered world. For al-Jisr, the issues raised by Darwin could thus be discussed in the classical vocabulary long used for matters of creation and the cosmos.

Borrowing from the popular Arabic science journal's own synopsis of Darwin's theory (which in a curious but entirely characteristic chain of transmission was itself borrowed from contemporary popular Victorian journals), al-Jisr included a long discussion of the four laws of evolution: variation, inheritance, the struggle for life, and natural selection. These, his Muslim argued in his dialogue with the materialist, seemed fairly straightforward, and he gave a number of quotidian examples of how one might see variation, inheritance, and the struggle for life operating in ordinary life. With reference to the last of these laws—natural selection—he simply argued that, if it was just the sum result of the previous three, then it too in no way seemed to contain anything that could be said to go against either common sense or Muslim scripture and its canonical and ethical laws, the *sharī'ah* (al-Jisr, [1887] 1905, 232–234). For al-Jisr, much of evolutionary theory was fairly mundane, and none of its precepts thus far could be said to pose any sort of challenge to a Muslim worldview.

The main sticking point for him—as it was for so many around the world at this time (including some major Christian proponents of natural selection such as Alfred Russel Wallace himself)—was the claim that man, with all his mental and spiritual powers, could be said to be the product of evolutionary laws alone. However, just as many in Europe could debate this point but nevertheless hold on to a belief in the workings of evolution applied elsewhere in nature, so too did al-Jisr ally himself with some aspects of evolution while expressing doubt in others. It was for this reason that he also treated the geological evidence—making lengthy reference to recent paleontological findings—in favor of evolution. Nor were his conclusions unreasonable: remaining to be convinced, he found the evidence adduced to date inconclusive as he thought it left many gaps and alternative possible explanations (al-Jisr, [1887] 1905, 236–238).

The longest, and for our purposes most significant, section of al-Jisr's dialogue was concerned with how a Muslim might judge the reported evidence for evolution in order to decide if any of its claims were contrary to Muslim principles. This brings up the main point that I highlighted at the start: namely that discussions of evolution in a Muslim context helped to revive longstanding theological debates over epistemology and interpretation, evidence, and exegesis. The full title of al-Jisr's treatise, we should remember, made reference not only to "the Truthfulness of Islam" but also to "the *Sharī'ah*." It is this emphasis on the *sharī'ah* or on the methods of ascertaining the precepts of the faith—what is also sometimes translated as "Muslim law"—that really were key here.

Because, in this context, reference to the *sharī'ah* also implies dedication to particular methods of reasoning, such as modal logic or syllogistical

demonstration and analogic or dialectical arguments (*istidlāl* and *qiyās* or *munāzarah* and *kalām*), the question of how to ascertain evidence, proof, or certitude proved to be at the heart of al-Jisr's treatise. His central preoccupation was how to mesh the epistemological claims of— or inductive and logico-deductive arguments for—an evolutionary (or, rather, an evolutionary-materialist) view of the formation of life with interpretative claims in the Qur'an and *sunnah*. Debating evolution in this context, therefore, brought up issues regarding the relationship between reason, faith, and scripture (Gutas 2002). Al-Jisr's meditation drew upon much older arguments developed by Muslim philosophy and theology about what it means to "know" rather than to believe and tested the utility of these forms of reasoning in evaluating the knowledge claims of the modern sciences. (Campbell et al. 2007; Frolova 1988).

Al-Jisr's particular theology of nature was thus framed in the light of classical *sunnī* debates over the nature of knowledge itself. In fact, "theology" in a Muslim context (*'ilm al-kalām*) had long been largely centered about questions of epistemology (Frank 1992). It was also being revived in this period as the "new theology" or *yeni 'ilm-i kalām*, throughout the Ottoman empire, and al-Jisr's treatise, for all the novelty of its interest in evolution, was in fact one of many that grappled with the relation between Muslim scripture and the modern sciences (Özerverli 1999). It was entirely in keeping with this genre, that al-Jisr's text was primarily concerned with epistemological questions, such as the bases of evidence, certitude, and belief or doubt, and not with ontological ones, such as the nature of God or of Being generally. Here, perhaps, lay one key contrast between Muslim and Christian responses to Darwin's ideas, broadly characterized. al-Jisr could easily sidestep some of the traditional natural theological concerns that we know Darwin's works raised for Christian audiences because they simply did not bother him.

For Darwin, of course, as for many of his Christian readers, natural theology had a very different set of implications. Take the question of suffering, for instance. For Darwin, it was evidence of suffering in nature that led him to question the traditional natural theological emphasis on design and beneficence in the natural world (Brooke 1991, 316; Moore 1981; Ospovat 1981). But in the classical—or 'Asharī-influenced— theology of al-Jisr, suffering or evil could be both purposive and transcendental. In other words, evil could be said to exist in the world in order to yield good, though not always in ways that could be known to men. Because both good and evil were co-constitutive and God's purpose in each ultimately inscrutable, questions surrounding design in nature that Darwin saw as unmet by Christian natural theology were not a problem for Muslim theologians.

For al-Jisr, as for so many other Muslim thinkers, the real questions that Darwin's empiricism raised concerned the nature of knowing itself: Where was the place for transcendental knowledge? Where should the boundaries of knowledge be drawn, and how far did the light of reason illuminate them? Restricting oneself to a purely empirical (or positivist) emphasis on sensory experience was generally not viewed by Muslim theologians to be a sufficient solution to these questions. And not for Muslims alone: many of the interpretations of evolution in non-Western faiths sought to combine positivism with some brand of transcendentalism, which explains why Spencer's vision of evolution (via Kant, albeit rather circuitously) proved so globally popular.

Al-Jisr's position—again, an entirely canonical one—was that only when given certain evidence (i.e., absolute irrefutable material proof on the one hand and sound logical certitude on the other) could a Muslim subscribe to a theory of evolution. But if he did on these grounds, there was no reason to think that this would threaten God's omnipotence or divine plan: for al-Jisr emphasized that it made no difference to God's absolute, divine power whether He created the world at once or in stages: in either case, it could be said to be created by God and by God alone (al-Jisr [1887] 1905, 222–225). The whole issue was thus really an epistemological one: a Muslim subscription to evolution could be granted as long as epistemological standards for certain knowledge or warranted belief were satisfied.

Yet it was also exegetical. It is true that in support of his conclusions al-Jisr made recourse to forms of argumentation derived from Aristotelian logic as well as from classical *kalām* discussions of the kind referred to earlier. But he also made liberal use of sources of revelation, citing freely from the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* while acceding to their self-evident authority. This combination of rational and revelatory arguments was common in Muslim theology and by extension in Muslim discussions of evolution. It also helps to explain the emphasis on exegesis that proved common to these latter works.

Indeed, much of al-Jisr's treatment of evolution hinged on establishing the correct methods of Qur'anic exegesis. If the theory of evolution by natural selection were to prove to be certain knowledge, he asked, what were the implications for how a Muslim should specifically understand the verses on creation in the Qur'an? Yet we should note here, too, that for al-Jisr the Qur'an's treatment of creation did not yield the same problems that Bible scripture did for Christian exegetes since the Qur'an does not begin with an account of Genesis as the Bible does, and traditions of analogic interpretation (*ta'wīl*) were in any case sufficiently accepted to avoid the problem of literalism. When thinking about the genesis of the cosmos, therefore, the literal meaning of the seven days of creation was not really an

issue. Referring to interpretations put forward by a number of prominent past Qur'anic commentators, al-Jisr made the argument that would have been familiar to most Muslims at that time, namely that the reference to a "day" in the Qur'an did not necessarily conform to a day in our common or conventional sense (al-Jisr, [1887] 1905, 228).

In fact, the use of metaphoric or analogic in preference to literal interpretation—in Arabic, *ta'wīl* versus *tafsīr*—was outlined in some detail by al-Jisr. His argument went something as follows: where the apparent meaning of the Qur'an was clear, there was no need to resort to a metaphorical reading. But where the meaning was by no means apparent or immediately manifest, then it was permissible. Even more strikingly, he stressed that metaphorical interpretations were also permissible where there was absolute, that is, logically or empirically derived evidence that could counter the seemingly manifest meaning of the verse. Once again this allowed him to argue that some issues—such as the age of the earth or the linked creation of forms over time—possessed a fairly flexible interpretative range in the Qur'an; while others—such as the divine origins or createdness of men—did not. As he saw it, references to Adam's special creation, in particular, were very clearly indicated in the Qur'an. Moreover, he seemed certain that evolutionary science would never be able to provide absolute evidence regarding man's spiritual origins—for the nature of the soul, he argued, would likely always remain ultimately among the "secret treasures" of Divine knowledge and unascertainable by human powers of reasoning or empirical demonstration.

Nevertheless, he did admit that if there should arise absolute material proof which could be used to logically deduce the evidence for the evolution of humans from "some lower form," then a Muslim would in fact be *obliged* to subscribe to such a view. He reassured his readers that this could not threaten their status as Muslims or their ultimate faith in God. For, whatever this chain of descent might prove to be, one could still commit to the view, as indeed Darwin himself did, that its life was "originally breathed" into a primordial form by some mysterious higher power—meaning for al-Jisr, of course, by God (Darwin 1859, 490).

Al-Jisr was interested ultimately in demonstrating the rationality of Islam. To do this it was not necessary to accept all of Darwin's conclusions—particularly if they did not stand up to the rigors of logical analysis or to the standards of certain proof. In the end, the only basic axiom that counted was that what is shown to be irrefutably true in modern science cannot be against Muslim tenets or any of the ethical, practical, and legal norms of the *sharī'ah*. Hence, the emphasis was on discussing what could be known to be true and what could be said to be mere hypothesis or guesswork (*ẓann*, a term of art al-Jisr used frequently in his discussion of evolutionary materialism in particular).

EVOLUTIONARY EXEGESES: MY FATHER ADAM

This intertwining of sources of authority that we find in al-Jisr's text—standing on the borders of traditions of logic, dialectic, and epistemology—demonstrates the resilience of Muslim theologians who felt able to debate modern evolutionary claims through the methods and conceptual vocabulary of their own scholarly tradition. Indeed, this was a tradition that would continue to shape discussions of evolution in Arabic for years to come. Al-Jisr was certainly not alone in considering the epistemological and exegetical impact of the theory of evolution along these lines and after him, the debate grew much more intense.

The best known and most influential of his contemporaries—far better known today indeed than the largely neglected al-Jisr—was the Grand Mufti of British-occupied Egypt, Muḥammad 'Abduh. 'Abduh, like al-Jisr (whom he knew and worked alongside briefly in Beirut) had also been worried about missionary inroads into Muslim lands. He made a number of references to evolution in his lectures on the exegesis of the Qur'an in the early 1900s for similar reasons to those of al-Jisr, though his ideas on the subject were much less well-developed than the latter's. After the Mufti's death in 1905, 'Abduh's work of exegesis was carried on by none other than Rashīd Riḍā, al-Jisr's own former pupil and an equally important and influential Muslim theologian with a similar interest in the relation of evolution and exegesis to his two mentors ('Abduh [1927] 1999, I: 234–5; II: 232–6). Riḍā and 'Abduh also appealed to the interpretive flexibility of a Qur'anic hermeneutics, just as al-Jisr had done earlier. For instance, when Riḍā was challenged by someone who espoused the view that Darwin's ideas went against the notion of Adam's direct and special creation by God, Riḍā replied that that all depended upon how one interpreted the references to Adam's progeny in the Qur'an (Riḍā, 1906, 920).

Even very recent works on evolution retain a concern with these themes as though carrying out Riḍā's suggestion was the prominent Egyptian intellectual, 'Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn who published a book in 1998 entitled *Abī Ādam* or "My Father Adam" (Shāhīn, 1998). In many ways, this relied on an approach highly reminiscent of Riḍā's or even of al-Jisr's (albeit in a diluted or a more popularized form). The book was, like theirs, really an exercise in Qur'anic interpretation or *tafsīr*. But its fate was very different to that of its predecessors. While the authors of latter were widely acclaimed in their day, Shāhīn was subjected to the scrutiny of the religious courts precisely because of his positive treatment of evolutionary ideas. Both the commonalities of approach and the divergence in reception of the two texts raise interesting questions about what had happened to Muslim hermeneutics and the theological engagement with science over the last century, a vast subject I can only touch upon here.

Like al-Jisr, ‘Abduh and Riḍā before him, Shāhīn sought to demonstrate Islam’s ability to embrace the truths of modern science through Qur’anic interpretation. Examining the verses on creation in the Qur’an, Shāhīn argued (and again, on this score, he was not the first) that the two words that have been traditionally taken to refer to “men” in the Qur’an—*bashar* and *insān*—actually hold very different meanings from one another. He took the former to refer to hominids. The latter he took to mean humans *qua homo sapiens*.

He did this primarily to facilitate his attempt to reconcile the Qur’an with recent findings in anthropology and paleontology. At the same time, he was critical of Darwin, whose work he announced at the start had now been decisively “rejected by the majority of contemporary scientists” (Shāhīn, 1998, 39). As was the case of al-Jisr’s text—which does not even identify Darwin by name, perhaps because he primarily had evolutionary materialists like Shummayil in mind—discussions of evolution in modern Arabic works were often inspired by Darwin but refracted through the lens of later generations of commentators. However, the nature of the influence had changed radically. In Shāhīn’s case the approach to Darwin was mediated not by the popularizing science press, but by the revisionist critiques of Christian creationists.

Yet Shāhīn still wanted, like al-Jisr, to point to the potential for a reconciliation of Muslim belief with modern scientific claims. He noted that the “problem of creation” was one that had plagued the ancients and the moderns alike. What contemporary Muslims needed, he argued, was a rational and yet still orthodox analysis that could reconcile the views of the forefathers with those of new sciences like geology, biology, and anthropology. In this vein, he interpreted the linguistic distinction between *bashar/insān* as confirmation of current scientific thought: from a long line of pre-human hominids (as evidenced in geological records) or *al-bashar* came the human species (*al-insān*) as we now know it.

This, however, entailed a potentially significant revision of common understandings of the Qur’an. In the book, Shāhīn matches the verses in the Qur’an that contain or refer to the word *bashar* with those which use or refer to *insān*. He suggests that *bashar* formed the larger category or classification of men: hence all *insān* were *bashar* but not all *bashar* were *insān*. He substantiates this claim by citing a verse on the creation of man that refers to his line or chain (of descent) —or a *ṢilṢila* from *bashar*. (Behold! thy Lord said to the angels: “I am about to create man [*bashar*] shaped [*ṢalṢalin*] from molded clay; Q15:28.) He also claimed that when revelation to man is discussed, it is the term *insān* that is referred to.

There was one problem: in the Qur’an (as in the Bible) man was said to have been breathed into life by God. Shāhīn reconciles this with his reading by claiming that God had in fact breathed “new life” into an old form. For it was only in man’s later stage of development or in his final

evolutionary state, Shāhīn suggests, that he acquired reason, language and then religion (which he classed as the “source of civilization”). But the origin of this “power of enlightenment”—as he calls it—still clearly came directly from God (Shāhīn, 1998, 89).

The aim of all this of course was to show how the geological and scriptural records could be made to match: Shāhīn himself dates the creation of *bashar* to around 12 million years ago and that of *insān* to about 40,000 years ago. Yet the implication was that Adam could thus be said to have been born of actual parents. This was not an argument that would have been familiar to most orthodox Muslims. Nor were skeptics in late twentieth century Egypt any more impressed with Shāhīn’s description of Adam’s forbearers. For Shāhīn also added an argument for the extinction of previous hominids. He said that man was in fact deliberately sent from Paradise to earth to reclaim it from these creatures who—although they like the *jinn* had been created to supervise the domain of earthly affairs—had in fact been shedding blood and wrecking havoc there for millions of years.

Despite the somewhat unconventional nature of these arguments, Shāhīn’s text was intended as testimony to the transcendental validity of an eternal and orthodox Islam. Yet its immediate reception showed that it was read as anything but orthodox. What Shāhīn had wanted to do, in effect, was broaden the exegetical scope and contemporary relevance of the Qur’an and hence, as he saw it, to accommodate new knowledge while simultaneously upholding the tenets of religious orthodoxy. Yet not everyone was convinced this was possible or that he himself had remained free of theological error in his own efforts.

In fact, shortly after its publication, at least two *ḥisba* court cases were raised against Shāhīn. (*Ḥisba* law refers to a new system of prosecution that had been recently instituted in Egypt. Essentially it allows private individuals to demand another person be brought to trial for blasphemy and other transgressions against the *sharī’an*. It is sometimes incorrectly translated as “blasphemy law,” but the concept is richer than that, and relates to notions of public order more generally. Under Mubarak this law was institutionalized and responsibility for determining whether there were grounds to prosecute handed over to *Al-Azhar*—Egypt’s oldest mosque-college and now its most powerful religious institution. It has since been repeatedly used.) In 1999, the Islamic Research Council at *al-Azhar* was asked to submit a report on Shāhīn. The Council reported that while Shāhīn was indeed author of a number of errors regarding his *tafsīr* or exegesis of the Qur’an and *ahādīth*, these were minor. Since Shāhīn had agreed to correct and revise these in future editions, it recommended that he should not be charged with threatening public orthodoxy. His book, therefore, was not officially added to the censored list of banned reading material, although it effectively disappeared from the market. However, since then a number of polemics—some even threatening further legal

action—have appeared and the subject has since been periodically revived in the press.

But there was another twist to the story: As it turns out, Shāhīn was no mere victim of religious censorship. A few years earlier, he had joined the former MP and conservative Shaykh Yūsuf al-Badrī in declaring another Cairo University professor an apostate. This was the recently deceased Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, a figure much better known than Shāhīn in circles outside Egypt. Zayd was an Islamic studies scholar who wrote extensively on the need for a new, literary hermeneutics of the Qur'an—or, in the words of one of his critics, a renegade constructivist who attempted to “reduce the Qur'an to mere fables.” In 1995 Zayd was declared an apostate under the new *ḥisba* law, and went into exile in the Netherlands. His case gathered so much attention and criticism that it eventually led to a revision in legal procedures in the Personal Status Courts, not to mention prompting considerable debate elsewhere over issues of law and hermeneutics and the nature of secular critique (Asad et al. 2009; Berger 2003; Hirschkind 1995; Johansen 2003; Zayd 2004). Defenders of the cause of intellectual freedom in the Egyptian press therefore took a rather less than sympathetic view of Shāhīn's own legal problems, with many gleefully reporting that he was simply receiving “a dose of his own medicine.” The real lesson to be drawn here is that it is perfectly possible, as in the case of Shāhīn, to regard oneself as both in favor of evolutionism and a zealous defender of religious orthodoxy. Indeed, what was at stake in both cases described above was precisely this question of orthodoxy.

The fate of Shāhīn's text points to the paradoxes of its reception. The contrast with the response to al-Jisr's writings reminds us of the need to examine more closely some of assumptions about the relationship between evolutionism and faith in the Middle East. It is true that, broadly speaking, the new anti-Darwinism in North Africa and Asia has been steadily on the rise since at least the 1970s—paralleling the spread of global counter-modern movements in a similar vein (Ferguson et al. 2010). Yet as Shāhīn's case suggests, it would be wrong to think that this newly dissident literature takes a common line—for despite his conciliatory gestures as regards modern science, Shāhīn was also very critical of Darwin's ideas. Read closely, and perhaps taken a little more seriously than most contemporary scholars and media pundits have thus far done, many of these contemporary works in fact demonstrate a surprising range of interpretations and a complex intertwining of sources of authority, and in this respect at least, they echo the style of argument of earlier engagements of a similar kind (see, for instance, 'Azzam 1986, 1995, 1996; Khalidi 2006; Yusuf 1983).

The immediately obvious difference between Shāhīn's work and those of earlier authors such as al-Jisr or even Rashīd Riḍā (who offered a very similar reading of the distinction between *bashar* and *insān*) is that while the latter were largely upheld in their day as paragons of Muslim thought,

the former saw his ideas tried in a courtroom. It is a change that can be attributed to many things and to account for it fully would involve charting not only the major intellectual transformations that took place in modern Arabic thought over two and more generations, but also the drastic geo-political and socio-institutional history of the region.

Let me below enumerate embryonically some of the possible points of context and contrast.

The first is the change hinted at in Shāhīn's footnotes to *Abī Ādam*—namely the view that Darwin's is no longer a credible scientific theory, a view disseminated thanks largely to the global spread of so-called creationist literature. In a story replete with ironies, the appearance of a so-called "Muslim Creationism" from the inkwells of Christian fundamentalism—or a global Creationist movement (Numbers 2006)—is perhaps merely the last of a long list of unexpected convergences. Why the latter should have fallen on such fertile ground in the Middle East takes us into issues of the broader culture of changing geo-political and institutional trends. Though al-Jisr had in fact been writing in the heyday of the age of imperialism, as an Ottoman modernist, he also refracted European ideals of civilizational progress. He implicitly endorsed the Ottoman state's interest in adapting European sciences, technology, industry, and statecraft, and the imperial goal of reasserting Muslim intellectual and institutional traditions within a modern setting. Shāhīn is, by contrast, member of a very different generation. Though the formal age of empires had ended, the failures of independence and continued foreign encroachment into local affairs—both made particularly acute in many peoples' minds after the 1967 War—came alongside the loss of optimism in a technocratic state. Added to these, too, were far-reaching and allied institutional changes, namely the transformation of the legal structure within which the *sharī'a* has now come to be encoded and the rise of a public sphere and a mass state educational system that were only in their infancy at the time al-Jisr wrote.

Moreover, as I have tried to show, there were profound intellectual and even theological transformations taking place as well. As we saw, for al-Jisr science was thought to be compatible with Islam. This led naturally to a concern with the epistemic conditions of belief. And given that his *Risālah* was written largely as an apologetic, it presumed (if even only in part) that religious faith had lost some of its earlier self-evidence. This also helps to explain al-Jisr's emphasis on rationalism. For al-Jisr, demonstrating a rational Muslim discursive engagement with modern science's epistemic claims demonstrated the former's ability to ascertain true or certain knowledge. Hence for al-Jisr, belief itself became a matter of reasoning rightly.

In this sense, al-Jisr extended the relationship between skepticism and science to belief. Broadly speaking, we could class skepticism as one of the cardinal epistemic virtues of the modern science. After all, skepticism

has both constituted part of the very “protocols for proof” deployed in the sciences and became the assumed intellectual and ethical criteria for conditions of “warranted belief” (Campbell et al. 2007) Al-Jisr’s rationalist defense of the faith did something similar for religion.

For Muslim thinkers after al-Jisr, by contrast, the relationship was reversed. That particular strand of skepticism was taken to represent a kind of “doubt without end,” as one major late twentieth century Muslim intellectual put it. It was only when doubt could be “reinvested in the strength of faith”—as part of the common experience of intellectual crisis that precede a personal quest for moral certitude, for instance—that one could be said to achieve certain knowledge (Aishima and Salvatore 2009, 546–551). Put even more strongly, for these religiously inspired modernists, it is belief and not science that represents the only form of certain knowledge.

If there is one thing this paper, through summary comparison of two Muslim thinkers, has sought to suggest, it is to insist on the need to read theological texts and approaches historically. That the hermeneutical tradition of Muslim exegesis remains a primary means of engagement with evolutionist thought is in itself proof of nothing other than its own resilience. For in the course of the past century or so, it has seemed capacious and flexible enough to its practitioners to permit both a largely positive and a surprisingly critical set of readings of modern science’s claim to truth.

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