

# WHO'S AFRAID OF THEOSCIENTOGRAPHY? AN INTERPRETATIVE HYPOTHESIS ON HARUN YAHYA

by *Stefano Bigliardi*

*Abstract.* I scrutinize the ideas and works of the Turkish religious leader and author Adnan Oktar/Harun Yahya. I argue for a new definition of Yahya as the representative of what I call theoscientography, proposing to study his work according to such a model rather than in the light of his "Islamic creationism"

*Keywords:* Darwinism; Islam; technology; Harun Yahya

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« Qu'on ne dise pas que je n'ai rien dit de nouveau: la disposition des matières est nouvelle. »

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 22 (Ed. Brunschvicg, 1897)

"Do not say that I did not invent anything new: the arrangement of the material is new."

The aim of this article is to explore some relevant aspects of the work produced and disseminated by the Turkish religious leader and author Harun Yahya (pen-name of Adnan Oktar). I want to problematize the way in which Yahya has thus far been categorized and hence, occasionally, even neglected as unfit for study.<sup>1</sup> I will explore this categorization by calling attention to some essential traits of the logic behind his message regarding God and nature. Such traits, I argue, allow a classification that is not focused on the doctrine Yahya is most famous for, that is, "Islamic creationism." In the first section, I reconstruct the ideas and works of Yahya/Oktar. In the second section, I narrow down the analysis to Yahya's works devoted to creationism/anti-Darwinism and put forth the concept of *theoscientography*: I introduce its single elements with reference to Yahya's work, and I explain how they interact. In the last section, I argue that such a focus on theoscientography, while allowing a new and more comprehensive interpretation of how Yahya is placed in the contemporary debate on religion and science, is not exclusively Yahya's and that such a format is likely to be adopted by other religious authors and movements.

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## ADNAN OKTAR/HARUN YAHYA

Harun Yahya (Aaron John) is the name currently associated with one of the most controversial and vocal attempts at criticizing Darwinian evolution from the point of view of Islam.<sup>2</sup> The individual associated with the name Yahya is the Turk, Adnan Oktar (b. 1956 in Ankara). Oktar came to the fore in Istanbul in his late twenties, while studying philosophy and interior architecture design. As a preacher, Yahya blended Said Nursi's (1878–1960) interpretation of the Qur'an<sup>3</sup> with a criticism of Darwinism. Oktar indeed identified the idea of biological evolution with the utmost expression and root of contemporary antireligious materialism, and attacked it accordingly. In 1986, following the publication of a book dedicated to conspiracy theories, Oktar was charged with promoting a theocratic revolution and served 19 months in jail, undergoing the first of a long series of legal troubles. Oktar, who eventually dropped his studies, managed to gather a group of students from well-off families. This group gradually took on the form of a sect, whose activities and internal dynamics repeatedly raised the attention of Turkish authorities. To date, Oktar's biography includes episodes of hospitalization in a psychiatric institution, several imprisonments, and legal troubles for possession of cocaine, sexual harassment, and blackmailing of collaborators. All such troubles and legal indictments, some of which are pending, echoed in Turkish media; however, Oktar himself makes no mystery about them, narrating the vicissitudes of his life in interviews and other texts published on the Web. The man is presented as extraordinary and outstandingly devout, and his troubles are described either as the result of the occult agencies he boldly fights against, or as God's tests which he patiently endures. Oktar's life is described as completely dedicated to the defense of religious truth while his personality is characterized by inexhaustible stamina, passion for knowledge, and fine human traits like tender love for plants and kittens. During filmed interviews Oktar undoubtedly demonstrates a charismatic and self-assured attitude; he is constantly portrayed in very elegant, fashionable clothes and similarly dressed collaborators often accompany him and address him as "hodja" (preacher) and "agabey" (big brother).<sup>4</sup>

While a previous version of this article was being written (Summer 2012), almost 300 books in Turkish had been published under the name "Harun Yahya," more than 200 of which were translated into English. Yahya's official Web site listed almost 2,000 books in Turkish and approximately 1,300 in English. Furthermore, translations were available in another 60 languages, all widely advertised through more than 150 constantly updated Web sites. The original nucleus of Yahya's works is most likely produced by a team, whereas the translations are commissioned to, or more probably spontaneously carried out by, sympathizers around the world. The circulation of Yahya's products therefore is both centrally

guided and virally replicated. Such works are written in plain language, are highly repetitive, and seem mainly composed from a copy-paste technique; moreover, they portray a system of quotations that is far below any acceptable standard of scholarship. The books are indeed sprinkled with decontextualized quotations, for instance, from major scientists and scholars along with more controversial figures, with no distinction made between the respective intellectual profiles.<sup>5</sup>

Yahya has apparently discovered not only the secret for uninterrupted productivity, but also a source of fabulous wealth. The latter is not a result of his publications, however: all books, besides being materially available in glossy, full-illustrated editions, can be downloaded free of charge in different formats from his Web sites. This extraordinary diffusion already renders extremely likely that any bookstore goer or Internet user interested in Islam and science, sooner or later, comes across one of the texts connected to his name. However, in 2007 Yahya prompted the curiosity of potential readers when he sent the gigantic and luxurious first tome of his "Atlas of Creation" (768 glossy pages, 5.4 kg, 27.5 × 37.5 cm, with lenticular images on the hard cover), unsolicited and free of charge to natural science teachers, research institutions, and libraries as well as individual philosophers or scholars of religion throughout Europe and North America.<sup>6</sup>

Especially over the past two years, Oktar seems to have further intensified his initiatives and diversified his contributions as an opinion maker in public debates by engaging in different topics: he runs and appears on a television channel (A9), specifically in a long chat show where he sits with men and women whose beauty he emphatically praises, talking about politics and world affairs;<sup>7</sup> his Web site voices his statements about pan-Islamic unity, Turkish nationalism, and, more recently, building bridges with Israel.

Despite his maimed reputation in his home country, his extravagant TV appearances (some of which have become viral YouTube clips, especially those in which he flirts with heavily made-up young women) and the shortcomings of his books from a scholarly point of view, Oktar/Yahya still enjoys worldwide respect by readers seemingly unaware of his whimsicality. In 2010, Yahya was selected among the top 500 most influential Muslims by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Jordan.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to catch a glimpse of the real dimensions, sources and reach of Oktar's activities, including the networking of the concrete people and institutions supporting them, behind the flood of multicolored books, Web sites, TV programs, and the inexhaustible self-promoted information about and praise of Oktar's life. In 1990, Oktar founded the Scientific Research Foundation (SRF: in Turkish, *Bilim Araştırma Vakfı*). The Foundation for Protection of National Values (*Millî Değerleri Koruma Vakfı*, or MDK) followed in 1995. The goal of the SRF, whose Web site boasts the organization of over 2,600 scientific events in Turkey and abroad, is the

“establishment of a worldwide living environment that is dominated by peace, tranquility [*sic*] and love”<sup>9</sup>; it is principally devoted to the defense of creationism. MDK instead seems more focused on Turkish issues. However, their real extent and connections, besides official statements, can only be estimated. Yahya must have powerful foes and friends alike. Telling attributes in this regard are not only his immense output, intense marketing, and massive free distribution (which presuppose huge financial backing), but also the pressure that he was able to exert on several occasions on the Turkish government in order to block Web sites perceived as hostile, like Richard Dawkins’s official one in 2008.<sup>10</sup>

Oktar’s biography must be recalled since it is part and parcel of Yahya’s narrative, and also because it is relevant to understand the reception of Yahya in his home country. Yet, as Taner Edis states, Harun Yahya is rather the name of a “brand” and Adnan Oktar “the public face” of such a brand (Edis 2008). We can now leave aside Oktar’s biography and all those aspects that are more liable to be deepened by investigative journalism, and linger on the ideas propagated under the name “Harun Yahya” as a brand. From now on I will therefore use “Harun Yahya” with implicit reference to the team of writers and/or to the label under which its products are diffused.

According to Yahya, Darwinian evolutionist doctrines are the source and lowest common denominator of all the violent and repressive phenomena of the last century, such as terrorism and totalitarianisms (communism and fascism alike), all rejected on a par with racism, romanticism, capitalism, Buddhism (*sic*), and Zionism (which to date he explicitly distinguishes from Judaism after a flirt with Holocaust denial in the 1990s). Yahya considers them all interconnected not only because, in his view, they stem from and foster materialism, atheism, and pessimism, but also because he claims that they received constant support from freemasonry through the millennia; he describes this agency as the principal occult actor of history in all its antireligious manifestations. Yahya sees Darwin as the major advocate of evolutionism; however, he also claims that evolutionist doctrines date back as far as ancient Greeks and Egyptians. Yahya rejects Darwinism by following a double-track criticism: on the one hand, he points out its moral consequences, highlighting the supposed disastrous effects of Darwinism-inspired ideologies, policies, and actions he envisages in history. On the other hand, he deems Darwinism unscientific since he claims that it lacks material proofs (such as fossils of “missing links”) and cannot account for the complexity of biological forms. Finally, in order to fight more efficaciously against materialism, Yahya endorses a theory of the inexistence of matter, which according to him is continually recreated by God.<sup>11</sup> Despite the common polemical target, he refuses to identify his position with that of the advocates of “intelligent design” because they do not make explicit reference to Allah; moreover, he believes the very

reference to a “design” limits the concept of divinity and agrees that the Earth is millions of years old.<sup>12</sup>

Against the evils that affect contemporary society, Yahya endorses an ecumenical and messianic form of Islam based on a return to religious values the symbols and examples of which are found in the Prophets. According to Yahya, the coming of a Last Prophet or Mahdi is near; he will appear and begin his activity in Turkey, the country that Yahya considers endowed with moral superiority and therefore apt to take on the leading role in the event of an Islamic union. It should be noted that, despite refusing to explicitly identify the Mahdi, Yahya constantly describes him in a way that, curiously, fits Oktar’s profile.<sup>13</sup>

One can use the term “message” when referring to the cluster of Yahya’s ideas considered as a whole. Such a message, due to the way in which it is produced and disseminated, can be easily doctored, reshaped, and adapted by Yahya, who can emphasize or delete single aspects of it over time: old subjects and stances, as well as online records, can be deleted (Rixinger 2008; Hameed 2009) while new topics can be addressed and emphasized. This poses specific challenges to all those who intend to study Yahya from a scholarly perspective.<sup>14</sup>

I have underlined how Yahya actually discusses the more dissimilar questions, even if he presents the topics of his discussions as deeply interrelated. However, if we consider the ambition expressed by the initiative of sending out the *Atlas of Creation* to institutions all over the world, and the general appeal of all such discussions to different audiences, it seems safe to assume that the most relevant aspect (that is, the one most likely to endure and to entice a global audience) of Yahya’s production is his “philosophy of nature.” Such philosophy of nature is represented by Yahya’s discussion of Darwinism and, more generally, by the way he presents nature in his works. From now on I will use the term “message” in specific reference to the latter, intertwined aspects of Yahya’s production.

Let us first take a look at Yahya’s philosophy of nature. While subscribing to the known doctrine according to which the miraculousness of the Qur’an is proved by its linguistic beauty and inimitability (*i’jaz*), Yahya utterly emphasizes its supposed “scientific miraculousness” as well. An inspection of his books, such as *Allah’s Miracles in the Qur’an*, shows that Yahya endorses the idea that the Qur’an mentions natural phenomena that were not known in detail (or wrongly known) at the time of the revelation, as well as technological inventions. Yahya mentions 87 cases, one of them being the Big Bang. Furthermore, the Qur’an, according to Yahya, predicted historical events and technological developments; he mentions 14 predictions, among which are the preservation of the mummified body of the Pharaoh who pursued Moses, the moon landing, coronary bypass surgery, and atomic technology. Moreover, Yahya holds that the Qur’an

displays patterns of word repetition which, associated to numerical values, have a correspondence with reality (e.g., the word “day” occurs 365 times) or special symbolic values; for instance, Sura 54 (“The Moon”) gives a numerological interpretation of 1969, the year of the successful Apollo 11 mission. The theories about “scientific notions” contained in the Qur’an are not an invention of Yahya’s, but can be found in the exegetic tradition known as “scientific *i’jaz*,” which likely originated at the end of the nineteenth century and is currently endorsed by some highly visible advocates—for instance, the Egyptian geologist Zaghloul El-Naggar.<sup>15</sup>

Yahya constantly celebrates nature, which is lavishly illustrated in his books, and describes natural phenomena as “miracles.” In this sense, the whole universe is, as the title of one of his books demonstrates, *A Chain of Miracles*. Yahya regards all the features and elements of the universe as clear proofs of the existence of God. According to Yahya, everything in the universe is necessary (which means necessarily made for human life) and conversely, necessarily pointing at the existence and benevolence of God. Yahya usually describes these phenomena in plain language, further enriching the description with a number of schemes full of numerical data, and occasionally sprinkling the description with supposedly relevant Qur’anic quotations, including passages from (allegedly) prominent scientists. Finally, he insists on the necessary character of the phenomenon upon examination with a sort of rudimental “counterfactual reasoning” that reminds one of Voltaire’s Pangloss in *Candide*: if the phenomenon in question would not exist, life would not exist either, therefore, God exists and He is benevolent. Yahya has applied this scheme to numerous specific phenomena, with books dedicated to each. So far, he has associated the term “miracle” with (in alphabetical order): animal migration, ant, atom, blood and heart, cell, cell membrane, DNA, electricity in the body, enzyme, eye, honeybee, hormones, human creation, immune system, microworld (*sic*), molecule, mosquito, photosynthesis, plants, protein, seed, smell and taste, spider, talking birds, and termites.

#### THEOSCIENTOGRAPHY

In what follows, I will attempt to enucleate three fundamental elements of the logic underlying Yahya’s message and argue that their interaction captures the defining traits of Yahya’s interpretation in a much more stringent way than simple reference to Islamic creationism and/or *i’jaz*.

- (1) *Argumentative theology*. Harun Yahya refers to the Qur’an, that is, to *revealed* knowledge, whose truth is treated as self-evident. However, Yahya’s discourse is not prevalently shaped as a paraphrase to the Qur’an, a lyrical diffusion on faith-related topics, a narrative hagiography centered on the Prophets, nor as moral exhortation to

follow a religiously inspired code of action. What is instead prevalent in Yahya is *argumentation*.<sup>16</sup> God's existence (and hence faith) are taken as the object of a structured, "rational" argumentation within which proofs are given and discussed.

- (2) *Scientification*. The structured discussion of God's existence is "scientific." By "scientification" I mean the attempt at *bestowing within the whole message the prestige and trustworthiness commonly envisaged in the natural sciences*. Harun Yahya obtains such "scientification" through three different yet intertwined strategies:
  - (2a) Yahya's works are written in a style that mimics scientific popularization with, for instance, quotations from scientists, usage of schemata and "data," footnotes (albeit incomplete ones) and so forth.
  - (2b) Yahya's discussion attempts to present itself as "more scientific than science,"<sup>17</sup> by targeting the famous (and famously connected to science) doctrine of Darwinism as its antagonist; it is apparently discussed on a footing of equality with experts by criticizing it, offering "proofs," asking for counterproofs and so on.
  - (2c) Yahya takes proofs as the "facts" of the "natural world" that are presented as what natural sciences examine, or is constituted of.
- (3) *Visual representation of facts*. In Yahya's works, the "facts" discussed fuse, and practically end up coinciding with, the *graphic representation of facts* that constitute a "graphic hyper-reality" *in which the verbal discussion is literally inscribed*. I use the term "hyper-reality" to refer to the fact that the pictures are doctored and assembled in order to enhance their visual appeal. The beauty with which they are then conceptually associated in the verbal part of the discourse becomes itself a "fact" that is used as a "proof." This must be seen as an *intrinsic feature* of Yahya's discourse, and it should be considered as the graphic counterpart of traits (2a) and (2c).

For the special interaction of (1), (2), and (3) as it is represented by Yahya's message, I propose the name *theoscientography*. The first element of this somewhat odd (and, I must admit, not necessarily beautiful) portmanteau refers to the "rational" theological side of the discourse; the second refers to the "scientification;" the suffix recalls the graphic element (yet the ancient Greek *graphein* can mean both "drawing" and "writing"—the resulting ambiguity in my opinion strongly underlines the inextricable interaction of the verbal and the visual that I perceive in Yahya's work).<sup>18</sup>

Let us explore my proposed definition in more depth. I argue that the three traits constituting theosciography are independent of each other; furthermore, the second and the third are not necessarily elements of religious cultural products; finally, none of the three is necessarily “Islamic.” Let me offer some examples: concerning the first observation it can be remarked that, although the demonstration of God’s existence through reference to the beauty and order of the universe has a long and honorable tradition, theology can well be presented and undertaken as a structured, argumentative enterprise without necessarily taking the “facts” of the “world” as proofs of God’s existence—for instance, John Hick (1922–2012) mainly devoted his theological work to the defense of the rationality of faith as an epistemic phenomenon that one can consistently assume.

I see scientification as a communicative strategy that is parasitic to other forms of production thematically connected to science itself and technology, such as scientific popularization. Scientification is a common strategy in marketing: quite banally, we have an example of scientification whenever a shampoo is advertised referring to its “pH” or whenever the virtues of a toothpaste are exalted in an advertisement with an actor playing a dentist in a white coat (although both the shampoo and the toothpaste might well be advertised by referring to equally pleasant but less “scientific sounding” qualities, such as scent and taste, respectively). It should also be pointed out that scientification can often be detected in new religions, especially as a proselytizing, ice-breaking strategy. For instance, it is a common experience that Jehovah’s Witnesses, while approaching potential converts in person, do not initially describe the most controversial elements of their creed, nor the strict rules of conduct and the hierarchical structures that characterize their religious life, but rather propose a “biblical study” so that a religious message is presented with the credentials of a scholarly, objective discipline. There are even more poignant examples: the Raelians’ official Web site hosts a regularly updated page of scientific news, therefore, proving to be “science-friendly” and scientifically updated.<sup>19</sup> In its proselytizing activities, both in person and on the net, Scientology (which evidently attempts to hijack science’s prestige from its very name<sup>20</sup>) tries to be “more scientific than science” while antagonizing psychiatry<sup>21</sup>—certainly not by stating right away the somewhat extravagant, sci-fi-like doctrine that actually characterizes L. Ron Hubbard’s (1911–1986) church.

Finally, the construction of a visual hyper-reality is not necessarily encountered in a religious context: all the magazines devoted to scientific popularization the world over count on the visual appeal of the “facts” they represent to sell more copies. Furthermore, there are instances of a usage of pictures in a religious context analogous to Yahya’s one. Telling is the example of those illustrated booklets distributed by Jehovah’s Witnesses that constantly present enticing pictures of nature and the universe, either in order to argue in favor of the existence of a Creator or to depict the



afterlife—the delights of which are shown as a hyper-reality in which all visual and sensorial qualities of the present world are exalted.<sup>22</sup>

The way in which Yahya's message is produced and disseminated is an interesting case study of a contemporary interaction between technology and religion. In his famous paper on "technosecularism," John C. Caiazza observed *inter alia* that technology invades our sensorial field up to the point that, whenever we observe our environment, we aren't encouraged to think about and praise *divine* creative power anymore, but rather human power (Caiazza 2005, 18). In her response, Antje Jackelén pointed instead at the interaction of religion and technology and coined the term "technoreligion" in reference to this phenomenon (Jackelén 2005). It can be observed that Yahya's usage of the visual representation of the "facts" of nature contradicts the idea according to which the ubiquitous character of technology overshadows the perception of God's creative power. As I have underlined, the "visual facts" are not reality, nor obviously nature itself, but rather a hyper-reality—yet the way in which they are used does refer to God's creative power in nature. Technology is used by theoscientography to extol a certain imagine of nature and, through nature, of God. Therefore, theoscientography in general, and Yahya's one in particular, can be said to instantiate Jackelén's idea of technoreligion.

It should be remarked that my proposed classification is not at all intended to downplay or conceal the pseudoscientific elements of Yahya's message. It should be clear at this point that "scientification" is *not* science. It indeed relies on (and encourages) a caricaturized, maimed, and misleading representation of science as being all about "facts." Moreover, it is also clear that Yahya incorporates specific pseudo-facts in his message.<sup>23</sup> However, *Yahya's message is not pseudoscientific because it incorporates anti-Darwinism: on the contrary, it incorporates anti-Darwinism because it is pseudoscientific.* Looking at the deeper logic of its production we see, in other words, that the criticism of biological evolution is just an expression and reflection of the "scientifying" strategy. As a result of (and consistently with) such a strategy, Yahya might well have decided (or may decide one day) to antagonize, say, black holes or light speed; for instance, he might claim that they are an insult to God's power, argue that they are not observable, vocally challenge Stephen Hawking in press, and so forth.

#### WHO SHOULD BE AFRAID OF THEOSCIENTOGRAPHY?

Arguably, most of the scholars who have approached Yahya as a polemical target or a cultural phenomenon so far have perceived or presented his message as an odd patchwork—both from the point of view of his mode of production and the specific ideas he propagates. Otherwise they have engaged in a discussion of creationism while missing the deeper logic behind the message itself. An understanding of such logic is necessary if one desires to efficaciously contrast Yahya.<sup>24</sup> We do not grasp the inner logic

of Yahya's production (and therefore its possible developments) as long as we solely describe him as an "Islamic creationist" (a label indeed liable to be applied to various, dissimilar authors). What might escape one's attention is that Yahya's rearrangement of preexisting ideas together with new modes of production and propagation in fact results in something qualitatively new. Specifically, scholars whose attention is more accustomed to diction might be tempted to regard Yahya's graphic element as extrinsic,<sup>25</sup> whereas, as I have argued, it is essential to his message. In particular, the graphic element of Yahya's message marks a qualitative turn in his production if compared to that of the advocates of the "scientific exegesis" of the Qur'an (although it is also represented as a similar attempt at "scientifying" religious discourse).

One can ask what is *Islamic* in Yahya's message. I am not essentializing Islam here by pointing at a "core doctrine" in order to argue that Yahya disrespects it or deflects from it, but I am rather referring to the frequency of references to Qur'anic passages, Muslim authors, and traditional doctrines in Yahya's message. As I see it, the Islamic element influences some thematic and stylistic devices in Yahya's overall production (usage of Qur'anic verses, Mahdism, specific narratives) and some modes of production concerning Yahya's visual hyper-reality—for instance, a direct representation of God is not allowed. Yet the presence of Islamic elements has to be considered in the context of, and compared with, other elements of such a message. For instance, an inspection of the *Atlas of Creation* reveals that Islamic/Qur'anic references and narratives are rather marginal. As I see it, Islam rather provides an extrinsic garb in which Yahya's religious message about God and nature is wrapped. In other words, Islam is not constitutive of Yahya's message's inner logic—that is, the scientification of a religious message. *Theoscientography* is not exclusively Islamic, nor Yahya's; it is rather comparable to a *TV format*. One can well imagine, for instance, a Hindu theoscientography. In order to better describe Yahya without losing reference to Islam, I therefore propose to define him *not* as an extravagant, vocal, Islamic creationist but as *the main contemporary producer of theoscientography in Islamic garb*.

It is my conviction that Yahya's appeal, despite his extravagance, should be taken as indicative of some cultural dynamics. Relevant in such dynamics is of course the way in which biological evolution is taught, perceived, and discussed in the Muslim world. However, there is more to the picture than this. The fact that Yahya can find so many sympathizers points at some objective difficulties in understanding and popularizing not just biological evolution but, more generally, natural science. I namely see the existence of theoscientography as parasitic on what can be called, in Lewis Wolpert's famous expression, "the unnatural nature of science," the non-commonsensical (and therefore easily misunderstood, or misrepresented) method and object of science (Wolpert 1992); with science's prestige all are exploited in a media-savvy way.<sup>26</sup> It might also be legitimately asked whether Yahya's misunderstandings were, in the first place, personal and

genuine, or if they are intentionally induced in the readership and cynically exploited to promote and nourish Yahya's overall message.

Who is afraid of theoscientography, and who should be? Rather than the advocates of a specific position in the debate on religion and science, all those who are first and foremost interested in setting up a discussion based on correct information concerning the nature and role of science, who respect the canons of a rigorous, scholarly exchange of ideas, and who are concerned with the popularization of scientific theories. Time will verify or falsify my hypotheses regarding theoscientography's potential to also be assumed by other religions. What should be more relevant to all those interested in engaging in the discourse on Islam/religion and science is to grasp the deep, unprecedented logic of theoscientography, the factors (and easiness) of its production, its appeal, and its expandability in different religious contexts; therefore, it should be criticized as such instead of simply attempting a piecemeal refutation of what is advertised through theoscientography from time to time, or poking fun at a specific author currently associated to its production.<sup>27</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have strongly profited from the scholarly exchange at CMES Lund, where I am currently serving as a researcher in the frame of the project MECW. I had the honor of personally discussing Oktar/Yahya's ideas with a scholar who counts as the greatest living expert in all things Yahya: Anne Ross Solberg. I personally met Mr. Oktar and discussed his theories with him and some of his closest collaborators in Istanbul on the night of February 12–13, 2011; I am grateful for the generous if somewhat extravagant reception. While most of his ideas leave me unconvinced, I respect Yahya's message as an example from which much can be learned about present-day cultural dynamics. I warmly thank Ingmar Karlsson, Elisabeth Özdalga, and Helin Şemmikanlı for the hospitality received at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, as well as Andrea Karlsson and Rainer Brömer for their substantial help during my stay. Bahar Ay and Baris Sunat helped me to translate Oktar's interviews. Darcy Thompson and Liesl Drew ensured rapid and impeccable proofreading. I thank Giulia Lasagni, who helped me to coin the term "theoscientography" and Joel Elliott, who gave me permission to quote from his work. My pages are dedicated to Alejandro Fabuel-Alcañiz and Ambra Colacicco, who took great care of my welfare while I was too busy with words.

#### NOTES

1. The definitions of Yahya are mixed. Martin Rieinger (2002) calls him an "Islamic intellectual." Halil Harda (2009), who rather focuses on Oktar's biographical vicissitudes, calls him "a ludicrous man for ludicrous times." Nidhal Guessoum, despite criticizing him, employs

the labels “thinker and writer” (Guessoum 2011, 109). As an example of hasty, supercilious dismissal of Yahya’s relevance, I can quote here a recent scholarly evaluation of a research project touching upon, *inter alia*, Harun Yahya (2011): “. . . Given Yahya’s strange views on so many subjects, and the court cases he has been involved in with criminal implications, I’m not sure Harun Haya [*sic*] is a worthy subject for such a study. Is there not some other Muslim intellectual figure who defends creationism but who is not tarnished by criminal court cases and other strange beliefs?” My reader will hopefully agree that “strange” is not a scholarly category at all; more importantly, as I will try to demonstrate, Harun Yahya’s religious message cannot simply be boiled down to anti-Darwinism, nor can it be easily dismissed with reference to Adnan Oktar’s court cases. To date, the most complete work on the “Harun Yahya enterprise” is Ross Solberg (2013), which I did not peruse while working on the present article. However, Anne Ross Solberg has read and commented upon previous versions of this paper.

2. When I mention the information that Harun Yahya diffuses about himself, as well as to his publications, I refer to the material that can be accessed from his official Web page <http://harunyahya.com/>. For Oktar’s biography see <http://harunyahya.com/bilgi/yazarHakkinda>. For Yahya’s books see: <http://harunyahya.com/list/type/1/name/Books/>. All Web sites (including those listed in the references) have been accessed in November 2012.

3. Analogously to Yahya/Oktar, Said Nursi was impressed and influenced by the help offered by technology in general, and communication technology in particular, to the diffusion of the religious message. Moreover, Nursi described the cosmos as theophany, thus criticizing the materialist doctrines of his times. For a reconstruction of Nursi’s life and ideas see Mardin (1989).

4. Oktar’s legal troubles are thoroughly reconstructed in Riexinger (2002), Edis (2008), Harda (2009), Higgins (2009), and Ross Solberg (2013). Such works offer a detailed reconstruction of the various aspects of the life and behavior of Yahya and his followers, which I only lightly touch on here. For a preliminary recognition of how “new interpreters” of Islam take advantage of the Internet, see Anderson (1999). Martin Riexinger rightly emphasized the relevance of such a medium in all reconstructions of Yahya’s ideas and work.

5. I have personally addressed several scholars in various fields about the alleged quotations from their works that I could find in Yahya’s *The Little Man in the Tower*, 2010 (<http://harunyahya.com/en/Books/2543/the-little-man-in-the>). These are the answers (all private communications, February 2011) that I received and was allowed to publish: “My quotations included in ‘The Little Man in the Tower’ were apparently sourced from my reply to an email I received in 2001 from a ‘Berk Turkan.’ Some are fragments whose meaning is distorted by being taken out of context” (Andrew Bendrups, Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University, Bundoora). “I am aware of the reference to my name in the booklet ‘The Little Man in the Tower.’ I have never spoken or communicated in any way with the author. So the alleged “quote” on his site is not a quote. I never commented on his work. Neither did I contact him when I discovered that he mentioned my name. I just didn’t think it was worth bothering with it” (Birte Schelling, Hafencity Universitaet, Hamburg). “I read the quote attributed to me in ‘The Little Man in the Tower’ and it looks like something I would have said (and would still say), though I don’t remember being interviewed by Mr. Oktar. I might well have been; I just don’t recall” (Thomas M. Crisp, Biola University, Los Angeles).

6. See Dean (2007). While this article was being written, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (Lund University) received the second volume. Through the CMES Director, I had borrowed a copy of Vol. 1 originally received by Lund University’s Rector Magnus Magnusson. I perused in order to produce the present article. Lenticular printing creates an illusion of motion and depth.

7. See <http://en.a9.com.tr/>; Krajcski (2013) expands on Yahya’s “kittens.”

8. See <http://www.rissc.jp/index.php/english-publications/miscellaneous/119—the-500-most-influential-muslims.html>.

9. See <http://www.srf-tr.org/statement.htm>.

10. See Randerson (2008).

11. To a philosophically informed reader such a theory may sound similar to George Berkeley’s idealism or to Asharite occasionalism.

12. For a reconstruction of Yahya’s theories in the wider context of creationism, and a comparison with U.S.-based Christian creationism, see Numbers (2006, 421–27). The analogies of Yahya’s ideas with Christian doctrines are underlined in Bagir (2005). For a thorough and

sharp reconstruction of how Muslim intellectuals reacted to Darwinian ideas see Ziadat (1986) and Howard (2011).

13. In order not to clutter the explanation and the article with a plethoric apparatus of endnotes that replicates the elephantiasis of Yahya's own work, from now on I do not give the single bibliographic indications, nor the URL of Yahya's books (not even those explicitly mentioned in the article); however, Yahya's book(s) and/or articles on a specific topic can easily be retrieved through a Web search for his name together with the topic itself. For instance, a Google search for "Harun Yahya" and "Buddhism" yields as a first result <http://harunyahya.com/en/works/732/islam-and-buddhism>.

14. For instance, Martin Riexinger points out the very fact that Islamic creationism was propagated on the Internet explains, among other factors, why it was initially overlooked by scholars (Riexinger 2008).

15. For a critical reconstruction see Guessoum (2008). El-Naggar's ideas are amply illustrated on his Web site: <http://www.elnaggarzi.com/>.

16. This might be seen as being latently in conflict with the continual appeal to the existence of God as a truism and to faith in his existence as inevitable.

17. I owe this expression, as well as the suggestion of Scientology-related examples, to Josef Schovanec's highly inspiring talk "More Scientific than Scientists: When Extreme Scientific Narratives Become a PR Strategy of New Religions," delivered on Friday March 2, 2012, at the conference *Religions, Science and Technology in Cultural Contexts: Dynamics of Change*, organized in Trondheim by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

18. New jargon is always unwelcome. However, since I am defining in a rather rigorous way what is meant by the term, and since my point is precisely that it corresponds to a new form produced by Yahya, but not exclusively Yahya's, and beyond his own intentions, I still think the existence of a new specific term justified. I hope my reader will perceive this as a compromise that is balanced enough. Furthermore, given my definition step by step, those who might disagree with me will be able to criticize "theoscientography" analytically rather than by pointing at the undisputable fact that the word is clumsy and technical.

19. Cf. <http://raelianews.org/news.php?item.485.2>.

20. Cf. [http://www.whatisscientology.org/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_term=scientology&utm\\_content=infographic&utm\\_campaign=wis&gclid=CJys07XVz7YCFRF2cAodAksAyg#definition](http://www.whatisscientology.org/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=text&utm_term=scientology&utm_content=infographic&utm_campaign=wis&gclid=CJys07XVz7YCFRF2cAodAksAyg#definition).

21. My reader can easily yield a considerable number of examples through a quick Web search for "psychiatry," "industry," and "death" on YouTube.

22. Cf. the representation of afterlife in <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/a-peaceful-new-world-will-it-come/1101991230/>. For a study of the iconography of Jehovah's Witnesses with examples relevant to my argumentation as well, see Elliott (1999). An interesting experiment would be to compare the elements of the "National Geographic-like" representations of earth aimed at "demonstrating" the existence of a creator with those used to illustrate the world to come. It can be asked whether there is any *iconographic* element, independent of verbal discussion, that distinguishes them, or if they can be interchangeably used (or, conversely, if they can be distinguished by onlookers without the aid of verbal information). I have found the usage of landscape, cosmic, and biological pictures together with a verbal appeal to their beauty and order as meant to demonstrate the creator's existence, comparable with Yahya's, in at least one booklet distributed online by Jehovah's Witnesses: *Lasting Peace and Happiness—How to Find Them* (2009, available at: [download.jw.org/files/media\\_books/5d/pc\\_E.pdf](http://download.jw.org/files/media_books/5d/pc_E.pdf); cf. pp. 9–12).

23. Mahserci (2008) is the articulated response of natural scientists to Yahya's "objections" to Darwinism, structured in questions and answers.

24. Two Muslim authors who have recently taken Yahya as one of their polemical targets are Nidhal Guessoum and Ziauddin Sardar (see Guessoum 2011; Sardar 2011).

25. Nathan Schneider instead appears to be on the right track when he points out: "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" (Schneider 2009). Analogously, Torsten Janson briefly points out the relevance of the illustrations in Yahya's books, emphasizing the connection with the work of Maurice Bucaille (1920–1998), popular representative of the "scientific interpretation" of the Qur'an (Janson 2003, 103–4).

26. As Taner Edis points out, "it is a lot easier to emphasize how crazy evolution sounds than to explain why it works" (Edis 2002, 76). In this sense, the Yahya phenomenon does contain an important teaching concerning scientific communication, scientific culture, and scientific education.

27. I have tried to express similar concepts in a less analytical way and with no reference to "theoscientography" in my article "Fast Food Harun Yahya," *Critical Muslim (CM8: Men in Islam)*, September 15, 2013.

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