HARUN YAHYA'S INFLUENCE IN MUSLIM MINORITY CONTEXTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH IN BRITAIN, EUROPE, AND BEYOND

by Glen Moran

Abstract. In 2006, the Turkish Harun Yahya Enterprise published and distributed thousands of copies of its anti-evolutionary text *Atlas of Creation* to educational institutes in the West. Although this was little more than a publicity stunt, it resulted in Harun Yahya becoming a mainstay in discussions about creationism in Europe. Although Yahya is often presented as the "go to" representative of European Muslim perceptions of evolution, one would be hard pressed to find the literature about Islamic creationism in Europe that does not engage in a discussion of Harun Yahya. However, little evidence exists to support the notion that Harun Yahya warrants such extensive attention, or that Harun Yahya has a substantive influence among European Muslims. This article will explore existing claims about the popularity of Harun Yahya, before drawing on recent research into Muslim perceptions of evolution to argue that Harun Yahya is relatively unknown among Muslims, at least in the British context, and is not influential even among those who are familiar with his work.

Keywords: creationism; evolution; evolutionary biology; Islam; Harun Yahya

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In recent years, there has been increasing concern about Islamic creationism, especially in Europe. For example, starting in the late noughties, a series of high-profile cases of Muslim rejection of evolution appeared in the British media (Gardham 2008; Henderson 2009; Davis 2011).[1] This, in turn, saw both academics and politicians focus a significant amount of attention on Islamic creationism, its origins, and possible methods to combat its influence (Hameed 2015; Carlisle et al. 2019, 135). Explicitly or implicitly, it was suggested that European Muslims were unanimously rejecting evolution. In many ways, such suggestions were built on preexisting ways of seeing Muslims as uniquely and homogeneously devout and as

Glen Moran is a research fellow at the Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; e-mail: g.m.moran@bham.ac.uk.

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"other" to Western scientific rationality (Elsdon-Baker 2015). Such views are not unique to the media, academic, or political spheres; rather, they are part of a wider phenomenon among the general public (Jones et al. 2018).

Much, although not all, of this recent discussion about the dangers of Islamic creationism in Europe started in 2007 and coincided with a high-profile incident of the promotion of Islamic creationism, namely, the mass distribution of Harun Yahya's *Atlas of Creation* (Yahya 2006). This book argued against evolution and promoted an "Islamic" model of creationism. Originally published in Turkish, *Atlas of Creation* was translated into a number of languages, including English, and was distributed free of charge to a range of science education institutions in the West (Guessoum 2009, 315; Bigliardi 2014b, 68; Hameed 2015, 3). While this should have been seen as little more than a publicity stunt on behalf of Harun Yahya (Paulson 2010, 304–05; Edis and BouJaoude 2014, 1677–78), it was instead taken as evidence for Harun Yahya's influence on European Muslim views of evolution. The significant global media coverage given to Harun Yahya helped Yahya's influence to gain attention outside of its native Turkey for the first time. One could argue that the disproportionate media coverage of the distribution of *Atlas of Creation* may have been the result of its Muslim and Turkish origins. Prior to this, creationism may have been more closely associated with evangelical Christian movements based in the United States. That a Muslim author—or authors—was now producing similar material was perhaps unexpected; however, it did play into popular media narratives of "Muslim irrationalism."

This article will assess the validity of previously made claims as to the influence Harun Yahya has with Muslims and in particular diaspora Muslim communities in Europe. It will then explore the influence of Harun Yahya among European Muslims by drawing on recent studies of Muslim perceptions of evolution in Britain.

The Harun Yahya Enterprise

Based in Turkey, Harun Yahya is often said to be the pen name of Adnan Oktar (b.1956); however, as Solberg notes, it is doubtful that Oktar is the sole author of the 300 plus books that appear under the name "Harun Yahya" (Edis 2008; Solberg 2013, 11). Both Taner Edis and Anne Ross Solberg have provided means of differentiating between Oktar the individual and Harun Yahya as a collective of authors. Edis (2008) refers to Harun Yahya as a brand for which Oktar is the public face, while Solberg differentiates between what she calls the "Harun Yahya Enterprise" and Oktar as an individual (Solberg 2013, 11). In this article, I follow Solberg in referring to the Harun Yahya Enterprise and refer to Oktar only when discussing him as an individual. In addition to reporting Harun Yahya's promotion of creationism, the enterprise has also gained recent media attention due to

the cult-like nature of the group (AFP Reporter 2018; Daily Sabah 2018; Ronel 2018), or more recently, "'Adnan's angels'—scantily dressed women who appear on his TV show and are commonly known as his 'kittens'" (Aydın et al. 2018; Agence France-Presse 2018; BBC News 2018; Reuters 2018; Ronel 2018). Harun Yahya has also drawn criticism for alleged anti-Semitism (Carrier 2011; AP and Bachner 2018; Ronel 2018).

In terms of its anti-evolutionary stance, one cannot fully understand the views espoused by Harun Yahya without first understanding the Turkish context from which it emerged, in which evolution has historically been used as a tool by both secularists and religious groups to promote specific political agendas (Hanioğlu 1995, 21–22; Riexinger 2014). Marwa Elshakry suggests that the nineteenth-century discourse about evolution never strayed far from the anxieties of empire (Elshakry 2014, 10). However, unlike other Muslim majority contexts, Turkey was never colonized by European powers. Instead, the Turkish Ottoman Empire had ruled large areas of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa from the fourteenth through the early twentieth centuries (see Finkel 2005). The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 saw it replaced with the secular Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kamal, commonly known as Atatürk (Finkel 2005, 545; Azak 2010). Despite being an independent nation, free from colonial influence, the modern Turkish state that Atatürk built was largely based on a secular European model, which left little room for public religion (Azak 2010, 211). In most Muslim majority contexts, debates were between individuals or groups, with little or no impact clearly evidenced on state policy. However, this was not the case in Turkey, where the republican Turkish government officially promoted evolutionary thought as part of a political and ideological agenda (Riexinger 2014, 181–82). The state adoption of evolution also saw it promoted and taught in public schools (Riexinger 2014, 181–82).

The secular nature of the Republic began to change following a coup d'état led by General Kenan Evren in 1980, after which the Turkish government adopted a depoliticized version of Islam as a means of broadening Evren's domestic appeal (Guven 2005, 201; Eligür 2010). This allowed new opportunities for former Islamists and religious scholars. In particular, the traditional religious scholar Said Nursî emerged as an important figure (Azak 2010; Riexinger 2014). Although Nursî promoted the idea of harmony between Islam and science, he did not directly speak about evolutionary science but firmly opposed the materialism promoted by the secular Turkish republic (Riexinger 2014, 185). Solberg observes that, "On the one hand, Nursî's science-conscious modernism and his attempt to integrate science with a theistic perspective have had a major influence on Islamic discourses on science in modern Turkey" (2013, 117). Nursî's followers, known as the *Nurcus* (translated by Riexinger as "disciples of the [divine] light"), began to adapt his antimaterialist writings to new issues,

including evolutionary science (Riexinger 2014, 185–86). As a result, creationism was officially introduced to the national curriculum in 1985 in collaboration with the U.S.-based Institute for Creation Research (ICR) (Peker et al. 2010, 741). Nursî is an important figure in the development of Islamic creationism in Turkey for a number of reasons, and Solberg has documented the influence of Nursî on Oktar in particular (Solberg 2013, 169–71).

An interior designer by training, Oktar, with no formal Islamic education, began to speak publicly on a range of Islamic topics in the 1980s and soon developed a following (Solberg 2013, 2). He published his first text on the subject of Darwinism in 1986; however, he soon met state resistance and was accused of creating propaganda aimed at destroying national sentiments (Solberg 2013, 4, 6). This was not Oktar's only brush with the law; he was also arrested for possession of cocaine in 1991 (Solberg 2013, 6). Despite his previous work on creationism, it was in the mid-1990s that he began to heavily focus on the subject. In 1997, Harun Yahya published *The Evolution Deceit*, which set out the enterprise's main arguments against evolution (Yahya 1997). Solberg observes:

> The book consists of three main parts. In the first part, Yahya makes a moral and religious case against Darwinism and materialism, claiming that as the pseudo-scientific underpinning for materialism, Darwinism leads to social evils and turns people away from God. In the second and lengthiest part of the book, Yahya seeks to present a full refutation of the theory of evolution on scientific grounds. In the third part, he makes a philosophical and scientific case against materialism, and concludes that both science and logic point to the truth of creation, the truth of God's existence and the truth of the Qur'an. (Solberg 2013, 122)

The origins of Harun Yahya's creationist arguments are disputed. Some have suggested that the content of Harun Yahya's ideas is heavily influenced by American creationist material, repackaged for a Muslim audience (Blancke et al. 2013, 1002; Riexinger 2014, 192). However, Solberg suggests that Harun Yahya texts go beyond simply copying American Protestant creationism, instead forming part of a tradition of Turkish creationism that developed independently (Solberg 2013, 114). Despite the differing views on the extent of American creationist influence on the thought of Harun Yahya, it is easy to see some similarities between the two. An all-encompassing presentation of Harun Yahya's arguments against evolution is beyond the scope of this article; however, the movement's general argument can be found in *The Evolution Deceit*. It says:

> Throughout this book it has been explained that the theory of evolution lacks any scientific evidence and that on the contrary, scientific proofs from such branches of science such as paleontology, microbiology and anatomy reveal it to be a bankrupt theory. It has been stressed that evolution is incompatible with scientific discoveries, reason and logic. (Yahya 1997, 162)

Harun Yahya differs from some other creationists by arguing against all aspects of evolutionary processes including so-called microevolution (Yahya 2009)—the acceptance of change within a species that does not result in speciation—which is popular with many Christian as well as a number of Muslim creationists (Guessoum 2009, 276–77).[2]

Discussing Claims of Harun Yahya's Influence

Following the mass distribution of *Atlas of Creation* in 2007, it became commonplace for academics, both scientists and social scientists, to refer to Harun Yahya as an important influence on Muslim diaspora views of evolution in Europe. I argue that there is disproportionate focus on Harun Yahya in the literature discussing Muslim perceptions of evolution, to the extent that he is often presented—intentionally or otherwise—as the "go to" representative of Muslim views. One would be hard pressed to find an article, book, or chapter discussing global Muslim perceptions of evolution that does not engage in a significant discussion of Harun Yahya. For example, in a 2018 book, Philip Lewis and Sadek Hamid make the claim that Harun Yahya is "hugely influential across the Muslim World" (53). This can also be seen in specific discussions of creationism in Europe. For example, in an edited collection entitled *Creationism in Europe* (Blancke et al. 2014b), discussions of Harun Yahya can be found in the introduction and chapters on France,[3] the United Kingdom, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and Turkey. The book's other chapters do not mention Harun Yahya, but it must be noted that discussions of Islam and/or Muslims in the book's chapters on Poland, Greece, and Russia are almost entirely about demographics and population size. No other Islamic creationist has achieved anywhere close to this level of attention.

While these are just two examples, discussions about Harun Yahya can be found in a wide range of sources (Edis and Bix 2004; Edis 2006; Enserink 2007; Guessoum 2009; Riexinger 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Hameed 2010, 2015; Numbers 2010; Thomas 2012; Bigliardi 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Edis and BouJaoude 2014; Clément 2015; Aechtner 2016; Dupret and Gutron 2016; Carlisle et al. 2019; Unsworth 2019), reinforcing the assumption of Harun Yahya's high relevance.[4] However, at present, there is little existing evidence to support the idea that Harun Yahya deserves such extensive coverage. The consequence of the unwarranted focus on Harun Yahya has resulted, I will argue, in a failure to appreciate real influences on Muslim perceptions of evolution and, as is discussed below, there may be good reason to challenge this common narrative.

> His [Oktar's] teachings are particularly attractive to Islamic youth living in the cities of Western Europe, many of whom indulge in a modern Western lifestyle while condemning Western morals for being secular, materialistic,

> and individualistic. To these young adults, Oktar's organization offers the perfect deal. (Blancke et al. 2013, 1002)

The above claims are deeply problematic, primarily as they are not supported by any evidence. First, they treat "Islamic youth" as a monolith and fail to appreciate the diversity of Muslim diaspora communities in Europe. Second, they do not provide evidence that young European Muslims "indulge in a modern Western lifestyle while condemning Western morals for being secular, materialistic, and individualistic." Such views resemble the previously introduced observations of Elsdon-Baker (2015) that Muslims are often seen as uniquely and homogeneously devout. An extensive body of literature has been produced by researchers focusing on the study of European Muslims, much of which would argue against such claims. Muslims, young or old, European or non-European, are not a monolithic community who share the same worldview or perceptions of concepts such as evolution. Since the publication of Blancke et al.'s article (2013), evidence has emerged that creationist ideas are indeed appealing to *some* European Muslims; however, this is not directly attributable to the factors listed by these authors. Instead, as hypothesized by Salman Hameed (2015), my own research suggests that the appeal of creationism to Muslim diaspora communities might be the result of creationism functioning as an identity boundary marker. Blancke et al.'s suggestion that Harun Yahya is appealing to young European Muslims is built on the assumptions of a monolithic Muslim community holding certain values. However, as we have seen, such claims may be unfounded. Given that they provide no empirical evidence as to the appeal of Harun Yahya, such claims must be taken with caution.

A further explicit claim of the influence of Harun Yahya can be seen in Blancke et al.'s chapter on the Low Countries in *Creationism in Europe* (Blancke et al. 2014a). In discussing Belgium, they note that "Harun Yahya seemed to have gained at least some support in the Muslim communities" (78). Yet, this claim is made using just two pieces of evidence. The first is a national TV debate that included the Antwerp-based Imam Noridine Taouil, who referenced Harun Yahya as supporting evidence for his creationist views. The second example was a 2009 case of Harun Yahya texts being used to teach creationist ideas in the state-funded Lucerna College, which was established by Turkish immigrants. The use of two small examples such as these to support the notion that Harun Yahya has gained any considerable influence is questionable. Had Harun Yahya's ideas gained any real traction in Belgium, it could be expected that further examples would be easily discovered; however, none were presented.

The second chapter within the same edited collection to make an explicit claim of the influence of Harun Yahya can be found in an article about Turkey by Martin Riexinger, who has undoubtedly made invaluable

contributions to the understanding of Muslim perceptions of evolutionary science, particularly among members of the Islamic clergy (Riexinger 2009b, 2010). In his chapter on Turkey in *Creationism in Europe*, Riexinger says of Harun Yahya, "Thus he [Oktar] gained enormous popularity, especially in the Western diaspora and Southeast Asia" (Riexinger 2014, 188). However, Riexinger offers no evidence for this claim, other than the fact that Harun Yahya's works are easily accessible online. As discussed below, the fact that Harun Yahya material is available online does not necessarily mean that they are regularly accessed by Muslims. The claim seems to be based on Riexinger's (2009a) work on the propagation of Islamic creationism online. In this earlier work, Riexinger says:

> With regard to his international audience the picture changes considerably. Links to his websites are to be found on a broad array of web-pages. Organizations dedicated to the "Islamization of Knowledge" refer to his websites to bolster their claims. By avoiding controversial subjects he becomes acceptable for different movements which are extremely hostile to each other. Among Muslims with a South Asian background his English website is linked by both Sufi oriented Barelwīs as well as their archenemies, the puritan Deobandīs. In the West his popularity is not restricted to migrant communities, he also reaches out to converts. (Riexinger 2009a, 107)

The claim of Harun Yahya's popularity in the West, as presented by Riexinger, is not supported by extensive evidence. Rather, his suggestion that Harun Yahya is acceptable to both the Berelwi and Deobandi movements is supported by a solitary web link for each group. In both cases, these are websites of individual mosques that claim affiliation with these broader groups. This is also the case with the suggestion that Harun Yahya is popular among converts, as he again provides a solitary link to a Spanish website. How far one can take solitary websites as representative of fairly sizable communities is a point for further discussion and may present an opportunity for further research.

The assumption of the importance of Harun Yahya in shaping European or even global Muslim perceptions of evolution may be the result of disciplinary differences and backgrounds. With the exception of Lewis and Hamid (2018), none of the authors listed above are social scientists by training or have backgrounds in the study of Muslim communities. Instead, they are primarily philosophers of science or, in the case of Riexinger, a historian of the Islamic intellectual tradition and of science. On the other hand, those engaged in the study of Muslim communities in Britain rarely touch on themes of science and Islam from empirical research—for example, the previously cited case of Lewis and Hamid (both established researchers of Muslim communities in Britain) in which they claim a huge influence for Harun Yahya "across the Muslim World" (Lewis and Hamid 2018, 53). With no readily available data to access the degree to which the movement is influential among Muslims, Lewis and Hamid instead rely on the work

of the Algerian astrophysicist Nidhal Guessoum, a Muslim proponent of evolution, who makes the explicit claim of Harun Yahya's influence:

> With over 150 books published under his name in over a dozen languages, well-produced but cheaply sold magazines, audio-visual material that is often distributed for free and a website that contains tons of free material, Yahya (and his group) target(s) a very wide audience. Indeed, his message, though explicitly referring to Allah, the Creator, and his wisdom, is often soft and made to appeal to educated and modern readers; indeed, his fame and success is as high among Muslims in the West as it is among Muslims in Islamic countries. (Guessoum 2009, 315)

In support of this claim, Guessoum references the wide availability of Harun Yahya material and Danielle Koning's (2006) article about Muslim perceptions of evolution in Holland. However, nowhere in Koning's article can such a claim be found (Koning 2006). Rather, Koning mentions Harun Yahya in the introduction, saying;

> In December 2004, local and national media were stirred by an incident at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. A group of Muslim students in the biomedical sciences were said to have carried out an essay assignment for the course "Man and Evolution" by uncritically copying anti-evolutionist scripts from supposedly anti-Western Muslim sites such as www.harunyahya.com. (Koning 2006, 48)

Nowhere in the article does Koning claim that her study found Harun Yahya to be popular. Instead, she contextualizes her own work by referencing a controversial incident that had recently caught the attention of the media. The incident itself does not indicate any significant influence of Harun Yahya among European Muslims. Instead, it only shows that an unspecified number of Muslim students had copied material from Muslim anti-evolution websites that included but were not restricted to Harun Yahya.

Academics are not alone in suggesting that Harun Yahya has become influential among Muslim diaspora communities in Europe. The controversy caused by the promotion of *Atlas of Creation* also attracted political interest. Hameed notes:

> In 2007, the Committee on Culture, Science and Education for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe warned that "if we are not careful, the values that are the very essence of the Council of Europe will be under direct threat from creationist fundamentalists" (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2007). While the report documents significant efforts to undermine the teaching of evolution by Christian creationists, including some high-profile public officials—Polish Deputy Minister of Education, the Dutch Minister of Education, and Italian Minister of Education and Research—it also highlights Turkish creationist, Adnan Oktar, and his brand of Islamic creationism as a major source of concern for education in Europe. (Hameed 2015, 1)

The report falls short of making the types of explicit claims of Harun Yahya's influence among European Muslims introduced above; however, the fact that Harun Yahya is specifically mentioned in the report's sections on Turkey, France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Spain implies some degree of influence (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2007). In each of these specific contexts, the mention of Harun Yahya is directly linked back to the promotion of *Atlas of Creation.* However, the report differs from the aforementioned academic work in that it acknowledges that many European Muslim organizations rejected the works of Harun Yahya. In particular, it gives examples of Muslims arguing for a potential compatibility between Islam and evolution. This recognition of a diversity of Muslim positions on evolution is sadly lacking in much of the academic literature.

The origins of both the academic and political interest in Harun Yahya seem to have emerged from sensationalist media coverage, which were primarily responses to the distribution of *Atlas of Creation*. In the United Kingdom, the mainstream media have taken certain other events as demonstrating the influence of Harun Yahya. For example, in 2008, University College London's (UCL) Islamic Society reserved the Charles Darwin lecture theatre to host a talk by a representative of Harun Yahya (Sample 2008). However, as has been the case with much of the media coverage of Islamic creationism, all was not as it seemed. Hameed conducted an interview with the organizer of the UCL event who reported that prior to the talk, she did not know much about Harun Yahya (Hameed 2015, 11). Hameed says:

> Her [the organizer's] desire to invite Harun Yahya's group was less motivated by epistemological concerns but had more to do with the idea of defending Islam. During the interview, I also asked her about her own personal views on evolution: she accepts microbial evolution and animal evolution, but has trouble accepting human evolution. (Hameed 2015, 11)

One of the few references to empirical evidence for the influence and popularity of Harun Yahya can be found in the 2010 edition of *The 500 Most Influential Muslims*.[5] The authors say that "His [Harun Yahya] extensive publications and views have won him 1.6 million votes on an online Reuters Faith World poll conducted by journalist Tom Heneghan in 2009 for 'the world's most influential Muslim'" (Lumbard and Nayed 2010, 87). Despite extensive research, I have as yet been unable to find the original publication of this poll. Without further information, important questions remain unanswered. What methods were used to conduct the poll? What was the sample used? Did Harun Yahya receive 1.6 million unique votes? From which countries were votes for Harun Yahya cast? Without answering these important questions, it may be problematic to use these data to draw any conclusions as to the influence of Harun Yahya.

What Does Recent Research Show?

Until very recently, it would have been difficult to assess the influence of Harun Yahya due to a lack of empirical data, and in many parts of Europe this remains the case. However, in the British context at least, recent research is able to offer some insights into such questions. This article will now draw on recently published data to explore whether or not the above claims of the significant influence of Harun Yahya can be supported. The main source of data I will draw on to explore this issue is my own doctoral research into British Muslim perceptions of evolution. I conducted sixty semistructured interviews with British Muslims of Pakistani and specific Arab heritages, in which I explored a range of issues relating to this broad subject. A decision was also taken not to target scientific or religious elites, in direct contrast with some existing studies. For example, Donald Everhart and Hameed (2013) in the U.S context chose to interview Pakistani medical professionals, while other studies from Muslim majority contexts have focused on professors and teachers (BouJaoude et al. 2011; Clément 2015). When sensationalist media headlines or generalizations are made about Muslim views of evolution, they tend to focus on the general population rather than educated elites, making a study of nonelite views even more important. As a result, few of my participants had any expert knowledge about science, theology, or scripture. In addition to my own research, it is also now possible to draw on the work of both Amy Unsworth (2019) and Paul Thomas (2012).

As part of my own research, I asked participants about the types of sources they use to find information out about issues relating to Islam, science, and evolution. While most actively sought information about Islam and science, evolution was a subject few reported ever researching. As will be discussed below, YouTube was reported to be the main source of information. In these general discussions that did not directly probe about familiarity with Harun Yahya, his name was only mentioned by two participants, Tahsin and Sanaa (discussed below). There was certainly no widespread engagement with printed Harun Yahya literature or websites.

Later, in the interviews, I purposely asked participants if they were familiar with the name Harun Yahya. Only twenty-one of the sixty participants responded that they were aware of the name, and even among those who said they were, most could not offer any information about him or his work. This suggests a limited familiarity with the name. This included participants who reported being firm rejecters of evolution. For some that did claim to be familiar with Harun Yahya, it seems likely a case of them trying to appear knowledgeable by affirming knowledge of somebody they are unfamiliar with. An example of a participant claiming familiarity with Harun Yahya can be seen in the response given by Ameen: "Harun Yahya? It rings a bell but I can't say. I am trying to think who it is, it does ring a bell." I would

also suggest that, for many of these participants, the name simply sounded familiar, as taken individually, the names Harun and Yahya are both names of Prophets in the Islamic tradition. For example, Moussa (male, Pakistani) said that "Erm . . . . I don't know. I think, well I believe he was one of the companions of the Prophet. But I don't know much about it."

Only eight participants were aware of Harun Yahya's work on evolution. Most importantly, none of these eight participants claimed Harun Yahya as an authoritative source on issues relating to evolution. For example, one participant, Tahsin (male, UK-raised Pakistani) reported that while being familiar with Harun Yahya, he does not actively read his books. He was also aware that Harun Yahya's arguments are not accepted by scientists. He said:

> I don't know, I know a contemporary figure, the work he does is ridiculed a lot. That would be Harun Yahya. A lot of traditional scientists would not accept his hypotheses at all. This was a very long time ago and I haven't picked up any of his literature for a while but that is the only one I know.

Other participants who were familiar with Harun Yahya stressed concerns with the personal character of Adnan Oktar. Waheeb (male, Kuwait-raised Lebanese) reported initially being impressed with the works of Harun Yahya. He recalled:

> Yes, I know that name. I think he is Turkish and he has a website. And I thought what he puts on his website. I came across his website by mistake. I thought he was doing marvelous things. Then I met somebody from Cyprus who was Turkish. I told him about Harun Yahya. But he told me he is one of the most corrupt men on earth.

The suggestion that even those Muslims who are aware of Harun Yahya do not see him as a figure of authority was also shown in the works of both Unsworth and Thomas. In Unsworth's study, she specifically asked her participants if they were aware of Harun Yahya and, unlike my participants, all confirmed that they were (Unsworth 2019, 238). Nonetheless, her findings mirrored my own, as her participants did not pay much attention to Harun Yahya (Unsworth 2019, 238). Unsworth's participants also seemed to distance themselves from the ideological leanings of Harun Yahya, with one participant saying that Harun Yahya is a "slightly different type of Muslim to us . . . I think he's the Wahhabi or a Salafi or something" (Unsworth 2019, 238). That neither Adnan Oktar, nor the wider Harun Yahya Enterprise, has Salafi or Wahhabi leanings shows a further lack of familiarity with the works of Harun Yahya. Thomas also showed that, while several of his participants were aware of Harun Yahya, he was only mentioned in a negative light. For example, an Imam interviewed by Thomas suggested that "Harun Yahya has no scientific credibility. He is just a populist in the same league as Zakir Naik" (Thomas 2012, 186). The

comparison between Harun Yahya and Zakir Naik is interesting as Naik *was* found to be particularly influential with my participants, especially among those of South Asian background. Naik's popularity was recently explored by Gardner et al. (2018).

In the case of Unsworth's participants, familiarity with Harun Yahya may be the result of the specific groups she drew her participant pool from, as all three of her focus groups deliberately involved participants from homogenous groups within specific locations. Unsworth further notes that as a result of the participant pools she recruited from "Islamist/Salafi reformist views are particularly prevalent in the focus group data, and should not be presumed as representative of the entire Muslim population of Britain" (Unsworth 2019, 232). Islamist reformist groups tend to be among the most conservative and may therefore be more active in reading literature on religious matters, and as a result be informed by international revivalist movements. The possibility exists that familiarity with the works of Harun Yahya among Unsworth's participants might be due to Harun Yahya being known within those specific groups. In many ways, this mirrored a focus group I attended in 2016 that was conducted by Stephen H. Jones as part of the *Science and Religion: Exploring the Spectrum* (SRES) project. The focus group was held in the North of England, with participants of Deobandi Gujarati background, who came from the same social circles. They were all familiar with Harun Yahya, although none of them considered him a trustworthy source of religious or scientific knowledge. A possible explanation for the group's familiarity with the works of Harun Yahya was given to me in a personal correspondence with the local organizer of the focus group, in which he said:

> [P]retty much all the guys in the focus group (except for one exception I can think of) attended the same mosque growing up in the 90s. This mosque has a bookshop appended to it which was well-stocked in Harun Yahya books during that period, and even the early 00s if I recall. Hence I think they would all have been exposed to the name "Harun Yahya"—though I doubt more than one or two would have actually read any of his stuff. Since he became a bit more controversial, and stuff about his "kittens" became well-known, the shop has stopped stocking his books for a while now as far as I know. So I reckon he was a peripheral figure for the group in terms of their religious socialization experiences in the 90s but no one seriously engaged with his work.[6]

The specific communities from which both Unsworth and Jones recruited their participant pools might explain why there was greater familiarity of Harun Yahya in such groups, when compared to my own study. I did not recruit participants from specific ideological groups but sought to recruit a wide range of participants from diverse backgrounds and different affiliations within the Islamic tradition, but what is significant is that across *all* of these, he was not seen as authoritative.

The only participant in any of these studies to have personally heard a talk from a member of the Harun Yahya Enterprise was Sanaa (female, UK-born Iraqi). Initially opposed to the idea of evolution, Sanaa attended a talk by Harun Yahya representative Oktar Babuna at her local mosque. Given the claims made in much of the literature about Harun Yahya's influence, it might be surprising that the talk actually resulted in Sanaa rejecting the arguments of the Harun Yahya Enterprise and seeking to investigate the possible scientific evidence for evolution and its compatibility with Islam. She recalls:

> He had come and he gave this whole spiel about how evolution is ridiculous, Darwin was evil and so on and so forth. And that was kind of, and also I had seen his text, but I hadn't read through it with much depth, but it was kind of propaganda-esque, in my opinion.

Sanaa then recalled her response to the content of the talk:

> And I am just like, but where is, you know, there is no evidence to what you are trying to argue and you are not giving the other side of why, why evolution contradicts Islam or contradicts creation. Because I am actually genuinely looking for somebody who can explain to me why evolution is contrary to creationism. So I am very open to people to explain that to me.

Sanaa's reaction to the content of the talk bears a striking resemblance to that of the organizer of the 2008 UCL event discussed by Hameed. She reported being disappointed due to the unsophisticated level of the talk, a view that was shared by other members of the audience. She continued:

> [Be]cause of the press coverage it drew in a . . . big audience and the audience were very disappointed. They were like, it doesn't make any sense . . . their arguments don't make any sense, and so a lot of non-Muslims came as well, and they were disappointed. I . . . brought some people and friends as well and . . . overall everyone was quite disappointed. But there were a few people that loved it. It was very mixed but a majority of people thought the talk went badly. Badly enough that when they tried to redo a talk by the same organization—but these were people who hadn't been there when the first talk was done—we kind of pushed for it to never be done again at UCL. (Hameed 2015, 10)

A further example of negative reactions to talks by members of the Harun Yahya Enterprise can be seen in the case of the Deen Institute's *Have Muslims Misunderstood Evolution?* conference held in London in 2013. The conference brought together a series of Muslim scientists and theologians, as well as Oktar Babuna from the Harun Yahya Enterprise. Videos from the conference are freely available on YouTube in which the majority Muslim audience can be heard laughing at many claims by Babuna. A review of the event by Hameed was published in *The Guardian* in which he says "he [Babuna] unintentionally served as a comic relief, when the audience

realized that after several hours of discussion, almost all of his responses included the mention of 'fossils,' irrespective of the topic of discussion" (Hameed 2013). The result of the above discussions is not only that it appears that many Muslims are not familiar with Harun Yahya, but even among those who are, he is often viewed in a negative light.

Lack of Alternatives

It is entirely plausible that a primary reason for focusing on Harun Yahya as the main influence on Muslim creationism is the lack of well-known alternatives, particularly for those more used to discussing Christian creationism.[7] For researchers such as Blancke et al., who do not have extensive experience of conducting research in Muslim communities, Harun Yahya may simply be a convenient point of focus. This is especially true given that Harun Yahya texts were translated into the languages that are accessible to Western academics unable to read languages used in Muslim majority contexts such as Arabic, Farsi, or Urdu. Others such as Bigliardi—who specializes in science and Islam discussions—may have focused on Harun Yahya in an attempt to provide a better understanding of the movement and its ideology, in direct response to the high-profile coverage the movement has received.

Whereas printed material from other Islamic creationists is not easily accessible, one can easily access a high number of videos on online platforms such as YouTube, as can be seen on the *Science and Islam Video Portal*.[8] For participants in my study, YouTube was a far more popular source of information than printed material, mainly due to ease of access. Indeed, a range of speakers who can be easily accessed on YouTube were regularly cited by participants as being influential in shaping their religious views.[9] Participants were asked which online videos discussing evolution that they had watched, and despite the fact that Harun Yahya videos are available on YouTube no single participant in my study reported watching them.

For my participants of South Asian origin, the Indian televangelist Zakir Naik appeared to be particularly influential, much more so than Harun Yahya. A medical doctor by training, Naik has established both Urdu and English versions of his TV station "Peace TV," both of which are available in the United Kingdom on SKY TV. According to Vika Gardner et al., Naik may be the most prominent speaker on the subject of Islam and science online. They note:

> A recently completed study searched for "all" videos addressing both natural sciences and Islam, finding 1,003 unique videos through May 2015 [beginning in June 2014]. Of those videos, 733 (73%) included at least one identified speaker, representing 481 speakers. Thirteen speakers—less than 3%—had ten or more videos each. The speaker with the most videos by far was Dr. Zakir Naik, a preacher from India, trained as a medical doctor. Thus

> Zakir Naik may be one of the most popular Muslim speakers addressing science and Islam on video today. (Gardner et al. 2018)

Naik justifies his anti-evolutionary stance by pointing to the fact that evolution is known as "evolution theory" rather than the fact of evolution. He says that "What Darwin said was only a theory. There is no book saying 'the Fact of Evolution'—All the books say 'Theory of Evolution'" (Bose 2016). This shows either a lack of understanding of the meaning of the word "theory" on Naik's part (Scott 2004, 11), or that he is deliberately misleading his audience. Not only do Naik's TV shows explicitly reject evolution but his organizations have also produced the literature that seeks to cast doubt on its scientific validity. This is also a feature of his TV shows in which he has often claimed that scientists also reject evolution (Naik 2012). Naik was mentioned by Zakariyya (male, Pakistani):

> I think it [evolution] was only discussed by some lectures by Zakir Naik when I heard. Not specifically in the friends circle. Maybe but I can't remember. But I think if you look at Dr. Zakir Naik's lectures they completely deny this evolution's theory and so my knowledge is based on that I would say.

For participants of Arab backgrounds, other authority figures were mentioned as having more credibility on the subject of evolution than Harun Yahya, the most popular of which was Adnan Ibrahim. Ibrahim has uploaded a whole series of lengthy online videos about evolution and Islam, in which he says that there is no reason for a clash so long as the role of God in creation is preserved.[10] Ibrahim does not limit his discussion to the relationship between Islam and evolutionary science but also the history of evolutionary thought, including early receptions of Darwin and the Huxley-Wilberforce debates. Ibrahim was mentioned in the account of Hussein (male, UK-raised Lebanese):

> I've forgotten what his name is [later clarified as Ibrahim], he lives in Sweden or something like that, he's a Palestinian that was raised in Lebanon, he's a doctor, he's a medical doctor but he's also studied Islam and he's a Muslim preacher. But he's very open to Western sciences and he's saying, look, it's been proved quite heavily that potentially we could have evolved from monkeys.

However, it is important to note that not all of those who report listening to Ibrahim accept evolution. This is markedly different from the influence of somebody like Naik. All of those who reported being influenced by Naik reject either all forms of evolution or only accept so-called micro-evolution—adaptation within species without the formation of a new species. As a result, it appears likely that for European Muslims, at least in Britain, other authority figures other than Harun Yahya are far more influential. This is likely to be the result of less media attention being given to these alternative figures. It is certainly true that Harun Yahya appears

to be the most prolific Muslim source when it comes to self-promotion of printed literature about evolution; however, others have successfully used other platforms to gain considerable influence.

Conclusion

This article sought to demonstrate that a major assumption found in discussions of Islamic creationism in Europe, namely, that Harun Yahya is particularly influential, is not based on any solid evidence. No study exists that I have been able to locate that provides any evidence for the influence of Harun Yahya among European Muslims. That is not to say that the movement does not have its adherents among European Muslims, or that it is not influential. Rather, this remains to be demonstrated in academic studies. Instead, I argue that Harun Yahya has become the sole focus of many discussions due to a lack of specialist knowledge about trends in Muslim communities and a lack of high-profile alternatives. The assumption has merely been recycled until it has emerged as part of a standardized discourse. In reality, it would seem from the data made recently available that the influence of Harun Yahya on European Muslims' views of evolution has been overstated. Admittedly, the data come exclusively from the British context and similar research in other European contexts is urgently required.

That his books are the most easily accessible sources of Islamic creationism, at least in Western languages, is undeniable. However, availability does not equate to consumption and little evidence exists that the texts of Harun Yahya are being actively consumed. Evidence in my research suggests that even among those who are familiar with Harun Yahya, either the enterprise's lack of scientific credentials, knowledge, or the personal character of Adnan Oktar result in him being largely ignored. Primary data gathered in my own work, as well as that of Unsworth and Thomas, have clearly shown that others such as Zakir Naik may be more influential, at least in the United Kingdom. It would also appear that the types of printed literature produced by Harun Yahya are not the primary source of information about the relationship between Islam and evolution for Muslims, certainly not in the United Kingdom. Instead, lay Muslims are far more likely to access information through online platforms such as YouTube. With this in mind, the work of the likes of Gardner et al. further highlights the disproportionate focus on Harun Yahya and the neglect of more popular figures such as Naik. For a more comprehensive understanding of how Muslim perceptions of evolution are influenced, a wider analysis of the views promoted by alternative authority figures, such as Zakir Naik, is essential.

Notes

1. This included a number of high-profile comments made by the prominent New Atheist author Richard Dawkins, death threats made to the London-based Imam Usama Hassan for

supporting evolution, and the UCL biologist Steve Jones comments that Muslim students were boycotting classes on evolution.

2. The acceptance of so-called microevolution but not the acceptance of the so-called macroevolution was common among participants in my doctoral research.

3. Although, in the case of France, Harun Yahya is mentioned within the chapter footnotes.

4. I do not suggest that all of these authors endorse the idea that Harun Yahya has any real influence on Muslim perceptions of evolution. Rather, they are cited as a means of showing how Harun Yahya often dominates the academic literature on the subject.

5. Harun Yahya was included in all editions of the top 500 list from 2009 to 2013.

6. Personal correspondence with the organizer of the focus group.

7. Christian-centric understandings of creationism have already been shown to be problematic in understanding trends among Muslims, particularly in quantitative surveys (Elsdon-Baker 2015).

8. https://sites.hampshire.edu/scienceandislamvideoportal/

9. Among the most regularly mentioned were Zakir Naik, Yasir Qadhi, Adnan Ibrahim, Mufti Ismael Menk, Muhammad Hussein Fadlullah, Arif Abdul Hussain, Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, Hossein Nasr, and Hamza Yusuf.

10. The lecture series can be found on Ibrahim's verified YouTube account, https://www.youtube.com/user/shaikhAdnanIbrahim.

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