

# THE FINAL DOMINO: YASIR QADHI, YOUTUBE, AND EVOLUTION

*by Glen Moran*

*Abstract.* Debates around the compatibility or mutual exclusivity between Islam and evolution have received increasing academic attention in recent years. While research into Islam and evolution has often focused on the views of Muslim publics, a body of literature has emerged that has focused on the views of Muslim clerics and public figures. However, little research has been conducted about how prominent Muslim voices have used online platforms, such as YouTube, to promote their own views on Islam and evolution. This article explores the online video presentations of one such figure, namely, the American Muslim theologian Dr Yasir Qadhi. The article will demonstrate that Qadhi holds a relatively nuanced position on the compatibility between Islam and evolution, based on his understanding of the scientific consensus and Islamic scripture. Furthermore, it will also explore how Qadhi appeals directly to Muslims to reject many of the most common creationist arguments against evolution.

*Keywords:* creation; creationism; evolution; Islam; Muslim; Yasir Qadhi; Harun Yahya

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There has been an increasing interest in the subject of Muslim perceptions of evolution in recent years. This followed a number of high-profile incidents of apparent aggressive Muslim rejection of evolution that received significant media coverage, particularly in the United Kingdom (Moran 2019). The framing of much of the discussion often drew on historical anti-Muslim sentiments and the “othering” of Muslims. It was even suggested by some that Muslims were importing creationist ideas into Britain (Gardham 2008; Butt 2009). Concerns about the dangers of Islamic creationism were even highlighted by politicians within the European Union (Hameed 2015). However, for many commentators, discussions about Islam/Muslims and evolution are often based on the assumptions of nonspecialists in the study of Islam and Muslims, rather than empirical

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social scientific research (Moran 2019, 843). Much of the recent discourse has focused on so-called “Islamic creationism” (Elsdon-Baker 2015, 437; Hameed 2015), often relying on the assumption that Muslims are a monolithic group that overwhelmingly reject evolution primarily due to religious objections (Hameed 2015; Carlisle, Hameed, and Elsdon-Baker 2019, 148). In response to the increased interest in the subject, a number of studies of Muslim perceptions of evolution have been conducted, ranging from a small number of cross-national surveys (Hassan 2007; Pew Research Centre 2013), localized studies in specific Muslim majority contexts (BouJaoude, Asghar, et al. 2011; BouJaoude, Wiles, et al. 2011; Asghar 2013; Clément 2015), as well as studies of Muslim diaspora populations in the West (Thomas 2012; Everhart and Hameed 2013; Asghar 2013; Guhin 2016; Moran 2018; Unsworth and Voas 2018). The focus and conclusions of these studies differed but provide enough of an insight to show that Muslims hold a variety of views about evolution.

A recent article drew attention to a specific problematic assumption made about Muslim perceptions of evolution, namely, the unsubstantiated claim that the creationist Harun Yahya Movement (HYM)<sup>1</sup> is particularly influential in shaping European Muslim views (Moran 2019). In this article, it was speculated that the overemphasis on HYM is in part due to the movement’s prolific output of printed literature. I argue that surveying printed literature certainly presents an important insight into the subject of Islam and evolution; however, it does not provide insights into the full diversity of views available. As a consequence, I propose that other mediums of communicating religious ideas be explored in order to provide a more complete understanding of the subject. In particular, Yusof et al. (2020) have argued that the use of the internet “as a medium of seeking and dispersing knowledge is now overtaking the roles of formal institutions.” Not only has the internet become a primary means by which religious ideas are propagated, but research also exists to show that it is a primary means by which people seek out knowledge about religion (Larsen 2001; Moran 2018). For example, a 2001 study showed that 28 million Americans used the internet to obtain religious and spiritual information, with 64% of religious students preferring online religious study and educational materials (Larsen 2001). Although Muslim use of the internet in propagating ideas has not been extensively studied, a small body of literature is available that explores this subject (Bunt, 2003, 2009; Pihlaja 2018; Yusof et al. 2020). Debates about Islam and evolution are no exception and one can find a wide variety of websites, articles, and videos online that engage in discussions on the subject. The importance of the internet in propagating Islamic creationism has been discussed by Riexinger (2009). An important area not explored by Riexinger was how Muslims make use of new media forms, such as social media, and “tube” platforms, such as

YouTube. This should come as little surprise given that Riexinger was writing less than four years after YouTube was launched and that even more recently, the importance of YouTube to Muslims has rarely been explored (Mosemghvdlishvili and Jansz 2012; Al-Rawi 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Launched in 2005, YouTube has grown to become the second most regularly visited website globally (Arthurs, Drakopoulou, and Gandini 2018), as well as the fifth most influential website of all time according to a recent *Time* magazine article (Fitzpatrick, Eadicco, and Peckham 2017). For content providers, YouTube provides an easy, quick, and effective means of disseminating messages, via easily uploaded and edited videos (Al-Rawi 2015), involving fewer elitist gatekeepers (Yusof et al. 2020). YouTube has successfully been employed by religious groups and individuals to propagate ideas, and religion has become the second biggest thematic cluster after music videos (Mosemghvdlishvili and Jansz 2012). Western Muslims, in particular, have capitalized on this to reach new audiences, who via access to laptops and smartphones are easily able to search YouTube for opinions held by a range of scholars and lay Muslim “influencers” at the click of a button. Indeed, some evidence does exist to demonstrate that YouTube is a primary source for Muslims in obtaining knowledge about Islam in general, at least in the British context (Moran 2018, 214–38). Given the significant platform provided by YouTube, and the ease of uploading content, it should come as little surprise that a number of Muslims have used the opportunity to propagate their own views on the relationship between Islam and evolution.<sup>3</sup> In searching for key English terms, such as “Islam and evolution” or “Islam and Darwin,” a wide range of videos on the subject can easily be identified. In doing so, one finds the most prominent videos are those posted by the likes of Salman Hameed, Shabir Ally, Zakir Naik, and Yasir Qadhi.<sup>4</sup>

This article will not attempt to survey the wide body of material found on YouTube that discusses Islam and evolution, rather it is an exploration of the presentations of a single content creator—the American cleric and academic Dr Yasir Qadhi, who is the Dean of The Islamic Seminary of America, resident Scholar of the Memphis Islamic Center, and professor at Rhodes College.<sup>5</sup> Qadhi has a significant online presence, with his official YouTube account having over 227,000 subscribers, while his official Twitter account has 429,000 followers at the time of writing. As a result, Qadhi has built a strong “brand awareness,” which Yusof et al. (2020) argue “may prompt more visibility among young adults as a social media influencer.” Qadhi is also one of the few English speaking Muslim clerics to have given several presentations on the subject of Islam and evolution, all freely accessible on both his own official YouTube channel and that of the Memphis Islamic Centre.

I argue that due to Qadhi’s successful use of social media and online platforms, he has emerged as one of the first celebrity influencer

Islamic preachers. Qadhi's views have previously been briefly presented by Fouad (2018, 25–26); however, this article will attempt to present the views promoted in Qadhi's online video content in greater depth. In doing so, I acknowledge that Qadhi has presented more detailed views in a coauthored article with Nazir Khan (2018); however, as this article is solely concerned with how Islamic views about evolution are propagated in YouTube video presentations, I will not draw on this written article. I will present his views along three broad themes. First, I will explore the context that has shaped Qadhi's views, second, I will discuss Qadhi's stance on evolution from a scientific perspective, and finally, I will explore Qadhi's presentations on the compatibility of Islamic scripture and evolution. I will show that Qadhi's views have not emerged in a vacuum, rather they appear to be the product of a response to high-profile incidents of both Muslim and American Christian creationism. Qadhi does not reject the general premise of evolution and calls on Muslims to reject the types of antievolutionary conspiracy theories promoted by some other Muslims. In presenting his views, I wish to make it clear that I am not making the claim that Qadhi *is* influential in shaping Muslim publics' views about evolution. Instead, I present his views in order to widen the focus away from HYM to other potentially important figures with demonstrably large online followings, who *might* be influential in shaping public attitudes.

#### YASIR QADHI'S INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

A full biography of Yasir Qadhi is beyond the scope of this article, and little material is available to build a comprehensive biography beyond interviews given by Qadhi himself. According to his official Facebook page, Qadhi was born to first-generation Pakistani parents in Houston, Texas in 1975 (Qadhi No Date). Qadhi spent his childhood between Texas and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia where he completed his primary and secondary education (Qadhi No Date). In regards to his position on evolution, these locations may be of significance as Texas is part of the so-called American "Bible Belt," arguably the hot bed of American Christian creationism, while Saudi Arabia is a conservative Muslim country known for its antievolutionary stance (Burton 2010a, 2010b; Yahia 2011). Qadhi would later attend the University of Houston, graduating with a B.Sc in Chemical Engineering. Feeling unfulfilled in his chosen profession, he took the decision to leave the United States to pursue theological studies at the Islamic University of Medina (IUM) in Saudi Arabia (Qadhi 2015), where he obtained both undergraduate and master's degrees (Qadhi No Date). After graduating from IUM, Qadhi returned to the United States where he completed a PhD in Religious Studies at Yale University (Qadhi No Date). Qadhi's choice of Saudi Arabia as a location

to pursue theological training may have been the result of his affiliation with a branch of Sunni Islam known as Salafism, at least in his youth (Qadhi 2013b). Understanding Salafism, therefore, becomes an essential aspect of his intellectual formation, as well as the views he espouses in his presentations.

Salafism emerged from within the broader Sunni tradition and has become an important trend in recent times (Gilliat-Ray 2010, 67–70). The term Salafi from which we take the term Salafism denotes a historical period of time that constitutes the first three generations of Muslims (Hamid 2016, 51). Many of the doctrinal ideas promoted by the Salafi movement are often reported to have emerged in the thought of the ninth century Islamic jurist Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855) (Lauzière 2015). The followers of Hanbal were known for their rejection of reason in favor of literal readings of scripture (Gleave 2013; Lauzière 2015). In its modern sense, the term “Salafi” was used to describe reformist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hamid 2016, 52). In seeking to resist a perceived decline in the Islamic civilization and European imperialism, these thinkers urged a return to the “unmediated teachings of the Prophet and the spirit of the Salaf” (Hamid 2016, 52). Nonetheless, as Hamid notes, contemporary Salafis are less concerned with external threats but are more concerned with religious belief and practice from within Muslim societies (Hamid 2016, 52). In particular, contemporary Salafism is an exercise in trying to obtain a “pure” Islam, free from external influences (Lauzière 2015, 6). Salafis reject “subjective knowledge, textual ambiguity and metaphor and dismiss the validity of interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith [sayings of the Prophet Muhammad] outside of a narrow cluster of Salafi scholars” (Hamid 2016, 54).

One form of Salafi Islam is a strand commonly referred to as Wahhabism—the name being a derogatory term derived from its founder Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92)—which has thus been adopted as the official religion of the Saudi Arabian state who have invested billions of dollars in promoting it globally (Birt 2005; Farquhar 2015). As a result, Saudi Arabia has become the leading proponent of Salafi interpretations of Islam (Hamid 2016, 54). Part of the Saudi investment in promoting Salafism has included heavy investment in higher education institutions, such as IUM. As Farquhar notes;

Since opening its doors in 1961, the IUM has been a central pillar of efforts by Saudi actors to promote the global proliferation of Salafi understandings of Islam, broadly aligned in core matters of creed and praxis with Wahhabism as practiced in the kingdom. The IUM was from the start committed to recruiting over 80 percent of its all-male student body from outside Saudi Arabia, with a comprehensive state-funded scholarship program covering their travel, living costs, tuition, and other expenses. The hope was that after several years of religious studies, they would return to their home

communities or settle elsewhere to promote the particular conception of orthodoxy they had learned in Medina. (Farquhar 2015)

As a result of his studies at IUM, Qadhi's theological training would have primarily been in this Saudi Salafi tradition and he continued to associate himself with the Salafi tradition, at least until 2013. However, it was in that year that Qadhi went on record to say that he had "sort of grown out of the movement now [i.e. Salafism]" due to its inability to address "modern issues" (Qadhi 2013b). Later, in the same interview, Qadhi elaborated on the specific methodological problems he has identified within Salafi Islam and its wholesale rejection of the developed Islamic intellectual tradition, by asking "when you get rid of all of that baggage and return to the original pristine Islam as practiced by the first three generations of Islam, what would that look like in the modern world?" (Qadhi 2013b). Although speculation at this point, it is possible that one such modern issue is evolution in which Qadhi is certainly more open to than some Salafis.<sup>6</sup>

#### QADHI'S POSITION ON EVOLUTION

In assessing Qadhi's stance on evolution, I will draw on video presentations he gave between 2012 and 2013. The first is from a sermon he gave at the Memphis Islamic Centre entitled *Reminder 15 - Theory of evolution and Islam - what do muslims believe? - Yasir Qadhi* (Qadhi 2012). The second is from his debate with Usama Hassan—also a Sunni theologian whose background is grounded in the salafi tradition—at the Deen Institute's *Have Muslims Misunderstood Evolution?* conference in London (Qadhi 2013a).<sup>7</sup> The third is from a presentation he gave in Hartford, Connecticut entitled *The Quran & Evolution: Thoughts from a Believing, Rational Muslim* (Qadhi 2013c).<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that these videos were not produced for the purpose of promoting Qadhi's views online, rather they were public presentations to live audiences that were recorded and later uploaded to YouTube. A number of other short clips of Qadhi discussing evolution can be found on YouTube; however, I do not draw on these shorter clips for several reasons. First, dates and locations are not offered, second, the context from which the clips are drawn is not available, and lastly, they do not offer any insights not provided in the three longer presentations explored in this article.

In exploring the positions held by Qadhi in regards to the relationship between Islam and evolution, the following areas will be discussed:

- *the context* shaping Qadhi's views about evolution;
- *the science* behind evolution;
- *the compatibility* between Islamic scripture and evolution.

The Context *Shaping Qadhi's Views about Evolution*

Given both the timing and content of Qadhi's presentations, it would appear that he was concerned with how negative Muslim responses to evolution might be perceived. In doing so, it is likely that he was responding to the coverage of U.S.-based Christian creationism that he makes both direct and indirect references to. Indeed, until HYM captured global attention, organized evolution rejection was often seen as an American Evangelical Christian phenomenon. For many U.S.-based Evangelical Protestant movements, biblical literalism is an important component of their religious worldview (Zigerell 2012; Guhin 2016). One implication of this worldview is the need to uphold a literal understanding of the creation story presented in the book of Genesis. Evolution is often seen as a threat to such literal understandings of scripture. Furthermore, many U.S.-based evangelical Protestants have raised concerns about evolution due to concerns about the influence of science on moral issues in the public sphere (Evans 2011; Evans and Evans 2010)—a theme also found in the works of HYM (Solberg 2013). In particular, this has resulted in a number of high-profile cases in which attempts have been made to have evolution banned in schools, or at least to teach creationist positions as an alternative (Long 2011). The high-profile nature of organized creationist movements in this context has often resulted in assumptions about how other faith groups—including Muslims—see evolution.

Perhaps, the most high-profile example of recent Christian creationism is Ken Ham, the founder of the U.S.-based Young Earth Creationist organization *Answers in Genesis* who established the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter visitor attraction in Kentucky. For Ham, not only does the biblical account of creation leave little room for the acceptance of evolution, but that evolutionary thought has also resulted in a number of evils, including lawlessness, homosexuality, Nazism, racism, drug use, abortion, social Darwinism, and male chauvinism (Rosenhouse 2012, 37). Many of Ham's activities have caught the attention of the world media, including his establishment of the Creation Museum in 2006 (Wells 2006; Redfern 2007). However, public figures, including politicians, have also promoted creationist views. A recent example—as further discussed below—is Sarah Palin, the former governor of Alaska and John McCain's running mate in the 2008 U.S. election. In 2008, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article in which it was suggested that Palin may have previously reported believing in a young earth and the belief that dinosaurs and humans had lived side by side (Braun 2008), a common trope in some recent strands of Christian creationism. While it appears as though there is some doubt as to the exact nature of Palin's views on evolution, the fact that this was reported by the media becomes important to the content of this article.

Having been born and raised in Texas and now basing himself in Memphis, Tennessee—both of which are located in the so-called “Bible Belt,” arguably, the heartland of Christian Creationism—Qadhi is likely to be familiar with high-profile incidents of American Christian creationism. For example, he shows familiarity with the aforementioned coverage of Sarah Palin’s controversial views on evolution and the negative responses to them.

Now, Christian comes along, biblical fundamentalist Sarah Palin version Christian. Says “I don’t believe in dinosaurs. I don’t believe that people were here seven thousand years ago”. Now we come along as Muslims and say I don’t believe in evolution, instantaneously, you become, excuse me, Sarah Palin. Do you understand brothers and sisters? When you deny evolution you might deny one element, which is that Adam’s father was a monkey basically, I am being very simplistic here but I’m just being a bit crude here because actually the theory of evolution does not say Adam’s father was a monkey. I’m just being, you know, purposely a little bit humorous here. But that’s the one thing you’re denying. And we don’t have any problem affirming other creatures, other species, hominids, dinosaurs, we don’t have any problem stretching the human chain to beyond 6,000 years. We don’t believe in 6,000 years by the way, it’s not an Islamic figure, it’s a Christian figure.<sup>9</sup> (Qadhi 2013c)

While Qadhi’s associating of Palin with a rejection of the existence of dinosaurs does not accurately represent the claims Palin is reported to have made, it does demonstrate a knowledge of controversial claims she has made about creation. Qadhi is keen to distance Muslims from this type of creationism, and is clearly concerned about how Muslims will be viewed if they do not. Given the timing of Qadhi’s main online presentations about evolution, it is also possible that Qadhi was concerned about the specific negative coverage of Muslim perceptions of evolution following the high-profile coverage of HYM in the preceding years. HYM appear to have been heavily influenced by American Christian creationists and they often share similar lines of argument (Solberg 2013), which may have resulted in some concern on Qadhi’s part that Muslims might be influenced by the types of views he distances himself from in his video presentations. Qadhi was exposed to HYM first hand at the aforementioned *Have Muslims Misunderstood Evolution?* conference, Qadhi shared a platform with Dr Oktar Babuna—a representative of HYM. As noted by Hameed (2013), Babuna served as a form of comic relief during the conference and few were left impressed by his content. Indeed, other examples of negative Muslim receptions of HYM lectures have also been reported (Hameed 2015; Moran 2019). Having witnessed the predominantly Muslim audience’s negative response to Babuna first hand, Qadhi may have become concerned of the way others might view Muslims should the likes of HYM be taken as representative of Muslim positions on evolution.

*The Science Behind Evolution*

The primary focus of Qadhi's presentations regarding evolution are theological in nature, with a particular focus on textual hermeneutics. Nonetheless, he also discusses evolution from a scientific perspective, although he concedes that he is less qualified to do so. Much of the content of his scientific discussions is aimed at re-educating his mainly Muslim audience as to the soundness of evolutionary science. Despite the fact that evolution is accepted by way of scientific consensus, religious creationists—including Muslims—are often the leading opponents of evolution. Qadhi shows his awareness of this point by saying that the "primary opposition to this theory seems to come almost exclusively from religious circles, who view their scriptures as providing an alternative explanation of the origins of life" (Qadhi 2013a). Qadhi directly addresses two of the main arguments made by religious creationists within his presentations, namely that evolution is part of a conspiracy and that evolution is simply an unproven hypothesis. For the former, the evangelical Institute for Creation Research in the United States has even produced literature that claims that evolutionists have had to resort to "smoke screens" in order to hide the lack of evidence for evolution (Morris 1999). Similar antievolutionary conspiracy theories espoused by some high-profile Muslims, including HYM (Riexinger 2002). For example, the Iranian-American Muslim intellectual Sayyed Hossein Nasr—who claims authority in issues of science, having studied geology and geophysics at MIT before obtaining a PhD in the history of science from Harvard University (Nasr and Jahanbegloo 2010)—argues that even Western scientists have rejected evolutionary theory, but have faced heavy resistance in publishing their findings:

There are many biological critiques made of the theory of evolution by biologists who in the Anglo-Saxon world would usually have been ostracized and marginalized. This is true of a person such as Douglas Dewey, who was a member of the Harvard faculty. As soon as he began to write about the criticism of Darwinian evolution he had to publish his book in Tennessee, rather than in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I am referring especially to *The Transformist Illusion*, his famous book, and since then, two generations have passed and little has changed as far as biology departments in this country are concerned. (Nasr 2006, 185)

Qadhi appears concerned that Muslim publics might espouse similar views and he directly addresses this point in his video presentations, saying that "this is not some global conspiracy that they're out to brainwash the Muslim world. This is their paradigm, their perspective" (Qadhi 2013c). Thus, we can further see the influences on the framing of Qadhi's presentations regarding evolution. He seeks to encourage Muslims to understand the scientific validity behind evolutionary science, discouraging them from rejecting evolution by using arguments drawn from Christian creationism

and drawing on the types of antiscientific conspiracy theories promoted by the likes of Nasr.

Also prominent in many critical discussions of evolution is the argument that evolution is merely an unproven hypothesis that remains to be demonstrated empirically. While there is little way of ascertaining how wide spread such views are, empirical data are available that shows that such views are present in some Muslim contexts (Thomas 2012; Guhin 2016; Moran 2018). Such views are also promoted by a number of prominent Muslims, including the Indian televangelist Zakir Naik (Naik 2014), who is popular with English speaking Muslims (Gardner, Mayes, and Hameed 2018; Moran 2019). For example, in one video available on YouTube, Naik was confronted by somebody claiming to be an ex-Muslim who challenged him regarding evolution. Naik responded by saying:

You are talking about “The Theory of Evolution”, brother—theory of Evolution. I am a medical doctor—I have not come across a single book in my life which says... ‘The Fact of Evolution’. It is “Theory of Evolution”. (Naik 2014)

Naik then added that “There is no book saying ‘the Fact of Evolution’—All the books say ‘Theory of Evolution.’” Misconceptions over the meaning of the word *theory* are common among publics—both Muslim and non-Muslim. Discussing this point, Scott says that the use of the word theory does not indicate that evolution is simply a hypothesis. She observes that:

The word “theory” is perhaps the most misunderstood word in science. In everyday usage, the synonym of theory is “guess” or “hunch.” Yet according to the National Academy of Sciences, a theory is defined as “a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world that can incorporate facts, laws, inferences, and tested hypotheses” (National Academy of Sciences 1998: 7). To explain something scientifically requires an interconnected combination of laws, tested hypotheses, and other theories. This reliance upon inferential reasoning is the hallmark of theorizing. (Scott 2004, 11)

Qadhi appears to be familiar with such views and in his presentation at Hertford appealed to Muslims to abandon such arguments:

We as Muslims, we need to understand that the theory of evolution pretty much has been accepted as much of a fact as any scientific theory. We need to stop deluding ourselves and saying that ‘oh it is only a theory’. That’s not a very academic way to phrase this. Rather, the theory of evolution is like the theory of gravity. Gravity is a theory by the way. The how it forms and what not, it is as much of a fact amongst the scientific community as most other theories. (Qadhi 2013c)

However, despite this, the latter wording of Qadhi’s presentation is notably more cautious when presenting his own views in regards to evolutionary science, saying:

I say this as a believing Muslim and I'm gonna surprise you by saying this, but inshallah [God willing] stay with me, don't don't just walk out now, let me finish the whole talk. I say this as a committed Muslim, that the theory of evolution from a scientific standpoint, in my humble opinion with a background in science, with a degree in engineering, with a minor in chemistry and in math and I have a degree in chemical engineering, the theory of evolution from a purely scientific standpoint, in my humble opinion, makes a lot of sense. Don't misquote me. I said from a scientific standpoint it makes a lot of sense. (Qadhi 2013c)

Qadhi's choice of words is interesting and it suggests an assumption on his behalf that his predominantly Muslim audience would be more resistant to evolutionary ideas than he is. As a result, he caveats these comments by saying that he only says that evolution makes sense from the point of view of science. However, later, in the same presentation, he does say that there is supporting evidence for evolution:

There are certain facts that are undeniable. For example, human bones, for example bones of humanoid species, for example microevolution, i.e. an evolution of a species slightly modifying itself. These are observable facts. If you take certain species of flies put them in a jar and monitor them for weeks with different circumstances, you will find that the flies actually adapt to those circumstances and over the course of generations they might develop immunities, they might you know, develop different wings or whatnot. And this is something that is undeniable. (Qadhi 2013c)

What is noteworthy in the above comment is that he seems to be suggesting that the empirical evidence is restricted to so-called microevolution—that species evolve but this does not lead to speciation, as opposed to macroevolution which does. Neither of these terms is used in this sense by evolutionary biologists, who do not recognize a conceptual distinction between the two, as both are part of a single coherent evolutionary process. Numbers suggest that U.S.-based creationists started to promote the idea of microevolution, while rejecting macroevolution, as early as the 1940s (Numbers 1992, 129–33). Macroevolution, they argued, cannot be observed and thus cannot be proven, whereas microevolution can be empirically observed. This allows for an explanation as to why changes can be seen within a species while falling short of having to accept macroevolution. John D. Morris, president of the Institute for Creation Research, refutes macroevolution by adding that no useful genetic mutation (macroevolution) has ever been observed:

Genetic mutations produce new genetic material, but do these lead to macroevolution? No truly useful mutations have ever been observed. The one most cited is the disease sickle-cell anemia, which provides an enhanced resistance to malaria. How could the occasionally deadly disease of SSA ever produce big-scale change? (Morris 1996)

Following their Christian counterparts, a number of Muslim creationists have also accepted microevolution, while rejecting macroevolution<sup>10</sup> (Guessoum 2009, 276–77). As a result, it is interesting that Qadhi has chosen to restrict his discussion of empirical observation to microevolution and would indicate further familiarity with and even direct influence from either Christian or Muslim creationist arguments. Qadhi’s position is more nuanced than to simply accept microevolution and he raises no objections to most forms of macroevolution. Indeed, Qadhi concedes that macroevolution—including for humans—is supported by the scientific consensus (Qadhi 2013a, 2013c):

It is clear that the theory of evolution is considered to be a scientific fact amongst large segments of the world. Indeed some have argued that there is almost *ijma'* [consensus], consensus amongst the scientific community that all life as we know it, including human life, originated from a universal a common ancestor. (Qadhi 2013a)

As we shall see in the following section, Qadhi does not, however, accept human evolution to be a reality. In this sense, he differs from a number of other Muslim theologians and public figures, who when rejecting human evolution, often try to discredit its scientific merits. For example, the aforementioned Naik said in his video presentation that “I do know there are some people who speak about Darwin’s theory—I am a medical doctor, I know about that—but do you know that there are hundreds of Scientists who speak against it. A few scientists ... few scientists speak in favour, — but there are more who speak against it” (Naik 2014).

### *The Compatibility between Islamic Scripture and Evolution*

Much of the literature about Islam/Muslims and evolution has often tended to portray Islam as a monolithic tradition and Muslims as a monolithic group (Carlisle, Hameed, and Elsdon-Baker 2019, 146; Moran 2019). However, the Islamic tradition has been notably diverse since its early inception. Accordingly, responses to evolutionary thought have differed significantly. As Hameed (2010, 139) notes, “Just as there is no monolithic Islam, there is no unified Islamic position on evolution.” As a result, any theological position given regarding evolution can at best be considered the independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) of individual theologians. In doing so, the primary source they will draw from is the Qur’an, which is the common feature of all Muslim denominations and seen as the word of God. Despite the common acceptance of the Qur’an as the word of God and primary scripture of the Islamic tradition, significant differences exist on how it should be interpreted.

Unlike the Bible, the Qur’an is not written in a chronological narrative. Instead, it is presented in chapters (*surat*), which often refer back to specific events in order to illustrate wider points, often with less specific

detail than the biblical account. As a result, creation is often referenced when making wider points—often about God’s majesty—and lacks many details of creation of either the universe or human beings when compared to the book of Genesis (Hameed 2010, 134). Like the Bible, the Qur’an talks of a six day creation although the Arabic for day (*yawm*) can also mean period of time and the creation account found in the Qur’an was commonly interpreted as a period of time. As Hameed (2010, 136) notes, “The resulting ambiguity has two important consequences for the debate over biological origins. First, it leaves open the possibility of a very old earth. Indeed, young earth creationism is wholly absent from the Muslim world, and a universe billions of years old is commonly accepted.” Likewise, the account of biological creation is also ambiguous, indicating that the origin of life was in water and that man was created from clay (*teen*) (Hameed 2010, 136).

While the great Quranic commentaries—often main sources of reference for Muslim theologians—never questioned the special creation of man and by extension other species (Rixinger 2010, 484), some have more recently sought to re-evaluate the Qur’anic accounts of creation. Hameed suggests that the ambiguous nature of these verses has allowed for some to argue for a reconciliation between Islamic scripture and evolution so long as the special status of humans is preserved (Hameed 2010, 135). The position taken by Qadhi closely mirrors this view as he accepts macroevolution of nonhuman species and says that this is acceptable from a theological perspective; however, very little time is given to discussing nonhuman evolution in his presentations. The disproportionate focus on human evolution is not exclusive to Qadhi and provides the main point of discussion in debates about Islam and evolution (Al-Haddad 2012; Naik 2014). Indeed, even some Muslim creationists who reject all forms of evolution do so only by reference to human evolution. Qadhi says that:

...all animals are linked together in some great grand tree. But, we as Muslims have to say there was one exception to the rule. That’s where we draw the line. We say there was one exception. And this exception of course was Adam and Benu Adam [the tribe of Adam, i.e. humanity]. (Qadhi 2013a)

For Qadhi, the Qur’an is explicit in its mention of the special creation of humans—a conclusion possibly arrived at due to the salafi literalistic approach to textual hermeneutics. He says that:

I firmly believe as Muslims across the world believe, that Islamic texts are clear on the origins of man. Both the Qur’an and the Sunnah inform us that humankind descended from Adam and Eve. And that they were the first humans created directly by Allah. (Qadhi 2013a)

It must be noted that while the arguments for human evolution often reference Quranic verses—undoubtedly, the primary source material for

Islam—supplementary content can be found in the content of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*). Riexinger (2010, 484) makes passing reference to the hadith collections being used to fill in the blanks of the Quranic creation story but does not provide a detailed analysis. In another piece, Riexinger notes that the hadith literature contains “information regarding the time-spans between the prophets, which sum up to a similar time frame to that in the Bible (Riexinger 2013, 500). The creation of Adam figured prominently in popular religious literature, such as the legends of the prophets.” Qadhi agrees with Riexinger and argues repeatedly that the hadith literature “is even more explicit” in detailing the special creation of man (Qadhi 2012, 2013a).

There are, however, numerous examples of Muslims that do accept human evolution. For example, the London-based Imam and scientist Dr Usama Hasan—who drew significant criticism from Qadhi when they debated human evolution at the Deen Institute conference—interprets the Quranic mention of dust, clay, and water as a reference to a mixture of water and minerals found on earth and in its soil (Hasan 2008). He says that “One problem is that many Muslims retain the simple picture that God created Adam from clay, much as a potter makes a statue, and then breathed into the lifeless statue and lo! it became a living human” (Hasan 2008). For Hasan, one of the main obstacles preventing Muslims from accepting evolution is what he calls the “children’s madrasa-level understanding” of the creation story. He adds that many object to the notion of human evolution from apes, believing that this would denigrate and insult all humans, including the prophets of God. He replies that:

[T]he theory doesn’t insult anyone, but does remind us of the humble origins of our created form. This is nothing new or blasphemous, since numerous Qur’anic verses remind us that we are all created from “dust” via sexual discharges: “despised drops of water”. Those verses clearly do not insult the prophets. Meanwhile, our spiritual form remains the most exalted, since it is from the spirit of God breathed into Adam: we exist for the most noble purpose of knowing and loving God, freely and after having been given a choice. (Hasan 2008)

Qadhi responds to such attempts to reconcile human evolution with Islamic scripture by saying that “I believe that any attempt to contradict or modify this Islamic argument [the special creation of Adam] is scripturally indefensible, historically flawed and methodologically shallow” (Qadhi 2013a). He is not the only theologian to be critical of those that have attempted to reconcile the two (Nasr and Iqbal 2009, 149; Al-Haddad 2012). Qadhi believes that the acceptance of human evolution can only be achieved if one adopts a metaphoric interpretation of the Qur’an. His opposition to relying on metaphorical interpretations

extends to issues other than science, saying “Because if we were to open this door and people have done this before, then we will say heaven and hell are also metaphorical and salah [prayer] is also metaphorical and zakah [alms] is also metaphorical and people have been there and done that. And the Qur’an was not revealed to be a metaphor” (Qadhi 2013a). Qadhi’s refusal to accept a metaphorical interpretation of the Qur’an is part of a wider debate in Islamic theology and as we have seen, the Salafi tradition in which he was educated leans heavily toward literal interpretations.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, Qadhi’s theological stance results in a problem. Not only does he accept that there is scientific consensus for human evolution, he himself also accepts the existence of prehuman humanoids due to the presence of indisputable evidence (Qadhi 2013a). His solution to this perceived conflict between science and scripture is a type of human exclusionism—a position not unique to Qadhi (Everhart and Hameed 2013; Guhin 2016; Moran 2018; Carlisle, Hameed, and Elsdon-Baker 2019)—whereby God intervened at a specific point in time. However, what is in many ways unique to Qadhi is his attempts to provide an explanation as to the different conclusions reached by theologians and scientists. Qadhi illustrates his solution to this question by use of an analogy involving dominoes:

And the max that can be said, now I am not saying this because I’m not a scientist but I’m saying the max that we can say, is to imagine if you like a series of dominoes tumbling and they’re all going, as we all seen on YouTube clips and whatnot, all going in different directions having been caused by one beginning domino, right? And eventually if these dominoes continue, one line of these dominoes will lead to that domino, which is a final domino known as man. Because we know for a fact that nothing has been evolved from us. We are the final Domino. (Qadhi 2013c)

Qadhi’s analogy is that if one domino were to fall, it would topple the following dominoes, resulting in a causal chain of dominos falling sequentially. A person viewing the toppled dominos would rightly conclude that each domino fell as a result of the previous domino. However, if somebody placed another domino at the end of the chain in a fallen position, an observer would likewise conclude that this domino was also part of the chain of sequential falling dominos. Qadhi’s proposal is that human beings were created separately to the evolutionary process in a similar vain to the insertion of the last domino. This would allow for the evolution of prehuman humanoids until the point of the special creation of man, as well as providing an explanation as to why it would appear that humans have also evolved from these earlier forms. Qadhi says that this would lead to a situation whereby a “neutral observer who doesn’t believe in Allah, ‘kafir’ [unbeliever] observer would automatically say obviously this Domino comes

from the one before it. And he has every right to make that claim” (Qadhi 2013c).

Despite often promoting this position, it is interesting that Qadhi himself does not commit to it, merely saying that it is the furthest a believing Muslim can go in accepting evolution. Although Qadhi’s domino analogy has been discussed elsewhere (Hameed 2013; Fouad 2018), the implications of the latter point are important and have often been missed. Although stopping short issuing a binding legal ruling (fatwa), in saying that the domino analogy is the furthest a believing Muslim can go toward accepting evolution, Qadhi is implicitly laying the boundaries for what is acceptable belief. The natural consequence of this is that those who go further in their acceptance of evolution could feasibly be considered to be non-Muslims.

### CONCLUSION

In his video presentations, Qadhi has demonstrated a far more nuanced position regarding evolution than has been thus far reflected in the academic literature of Muslim positions on evolution. The overemphasis on staunch rejections, such as HYM, has instead resulted in the perception that Muslims reject all forms of evolution. As seen in the case of Qadhi, this is not always the case. Qadhi sees no problem in accepting evolution so long as this does not include human beings. His objection to human evolution is clearly influenced by his Salafi literalist approach to scriptural hermeneutics; however, unlike other Muslims that have argued against human evolution, Qadhi does not seek to refute it in its broadest principles. Instead, he seeks to provide a theologically acceptable position that also explains why it would appear to nonbelievers that humans have in fact evolved. This is a significant departure from the views of many of the Muslim creationists—such as HYM, Nasr, and Naik—that have received previous academic attention. There is little reason to doubt Qadhi is sincerely attempting to reconcile science and scripture as far as possible, but as we have seen, it also seems likely given the timing of his presentations that he is responding to the wider phenomena of U.S. Christian creationism and the rise to prominence of HYM. He is clearly concerned for the public image of Muslims and Islam, should individual Muslims be seen to argue against the science of evolution in similar ways to prominent and often ridiculed Christian and Muslim creationists. In exploring the positions espoused by Qadhi, it is clear that some prominent Muslim voices have presented far more nuanced views than has previously been acknowledged. When combined with some of the recent social scientific research into Muslim publics’ positions on evolution, it is clear that the previously presented assumption that Muslims are unanimously hostile to evolution should be called into question.

## NOTES

1. Harun Yahya is often said to be the pen name of Adnan Oktar but as has been previously argued, it is highly unlikely that Oktar is the sole author of the hundreds of books to be authored under the name of Harun Yahya (Edis 2008; Solberg 2013, 11).
2. A notable exception is (Pihlaja 2018).
3. A full range of videos on the subject can be found at <https://sites.hampshire.edu/scienceandislamvideoportal/>
4. YouTube searches conducted on January 20, 2020. Given the disproportionate focus on HYM in academic literature, it is important to note that in searching for these key English terms, one does not find the content of HYM to be particularly prominent.
5. Qadhi also previously functioned as a teacher for the U.S.-based Al-Maghrib Institute.
6. Despite suggesting that he had moved away from the movement, Qadhi later clarified that while he no longer associated directly with the Salafi label or movement, he was still committed to its core principles (Qadhi 2014).
7. This video had received 40,897 views as of the February 5, 2020, although a longer video showing the whole conference uploaded by the Deen Institute had received over 50,000 viewings by the same date (The Deen Institute 2013).
8. This video had received over 47,292 views as of the February 5, 2020; however, the same video was uploaded with by 877-Why-Islam under the simplified title of *The Quran and Evolution by Yasir Qadhi* and has received 210,000 views (877-Why Islam 2013).
9. Young earth ideas are all but absent in Muslim contexts.
10. Interestingly, such views are rejected by HYM who have even rejected microevolution (Yahya 2009).
11. For more information about the wider debate about the permissibility of metaphorical interpretations, see (Winter 2008).

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