

# *New Frontiers in Islam and Evolution*

with Shoaib Ahmed Malik, "Introduction to the Symposium on Islam and Evolution"; Safaruk Zaman Chowdhury, "Explaining Evil in the Bio-Sphere: Assessing Some Evolutionary Theodicies for Muslim Theists"; Karim Gabor Kocsenda, "Shī'ī Readings of Human Evolution: Ṭabāṭabā'ī to Ḥaydarī"; Khalil Andani, "Evolving Creation: An Ismaili Muslim Interpretation of Evolution"; David Solomon Jalajel, "Presumptions about God's Wisdom in Muslim Arguments for and against Evolution"; and Shoaib Ahmed Malik, Hamza Karamali, and Moamer Yahia Ali Khalayleh, "Does Criticizing Intelligent Design (ID) Undermine Design Discourse in the Qur'ān?"

## EVOLVING CREATION: AN ISMAILI MUSLIM INTERPRETATION OF EVOLUTION

by Khalil Andani

*Abstract.* This article presents a constructive Shī'ī Ismaili Muslim engagement with Neo-Darwinian evolution. By drawing on Ismaili metaphysics and hermeneutics, I argue that Ismailis can affirm evolution without exceptions due to four features of contemporary and historical Ismaili thought. First, Aga Khan III (d. 1957), the 48th hereditary Ismaili Imam, integrated Neo-Darwinian evolution with his theological views. Likewise, the present Imam Aga Khan IV (b. 1936) teaches that there is no conflict between Islam and scientific truth because God's creative act is eternal and continuous. Second, Ismaili Neoplatonic metaphysics is compatible with evolution because it situates all natural processes as guided by the Universal Soul without a need for miracles. Third, the common descent of all life lends further support to the Ismaili belief in an unbroken lineage of hereditary Imams since the origins of life on earth. Fourth, the Quranic story of Adam's creation poses no hermeneutical issue because Ismaili scholars read the Adam story symbolically through esoteric exegesis (*ta'wīl*).

*Keywords:* Adam; Aga Khan; creation; evolution; hermeneutics; Imamate; Ismaili; Neoplatonic; al-Sijistānī; Universal Intellect; Universal Soul

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The publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was a watershed moment in the history of ideas and precipitated a torrent of responses from religious thinkers. Most theological interpretations of Neo-Darwinian evolution today come from Christian voices. In more recent decades,

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there have been several noteworthy Muslim responses to evolution (see Riexinger 2009; Elshakry 2011; Varisco 2018). Malik (2021, 113) has categorized major Muslim responses into following categories:

**Creationism:** No lifeform, including humans, was a product of evolution.

**Proponents:** Zakir Naik, Seyyed Hossin Nasr, Muzaffar Iqbal, Harun Yahya

**Human exceptionalism:** Nonhuman life was the product of evolution but the first human being Adam/Eve was miraculously created by God.

**Proponents:** Nuh Ha Mim Keller, Yasir Qadhi and Nazir Khan

**Adamic exceptionalism:** Nonhuman life and human beings are the products of evolution but Adam/Eve was miraculously created by God.

**Proponents:** David Solomon Jalajel

**No exceptions:** All life on earth, including humanity and Adam/Eve are the products of evolution.

**Proponents:** Rana Dajani, Mohamed Iqbal, Nidhal Guessoum, T.O. Shanavas, Caner Taslaman

However, primary and secondary literature on Islam and evolution hardly feature perspectives from Shīʿī Islam. In the conclusion to *Islam and Evolution*, Malik observed that Shīʿī Islam remains a fruitful area for future research on the topic (Malik 2021, 341). Furthermore, there is yet to be a study of how evolution is interpreted within the Shīʿī Ismaili tradition. One major reason for this is that there are no contemporary Shīʿī Ismaili expositions dealing with modern evolutionary theory in academic literature.

The present article seeks to fill this gap by presenting a constructive Shīʿī Ismaili Muslim engagement with Neo-Darwinian evolution grounded in Ismaili theology, metaphysics, and Quranic hermeneutics. This will serve as the first contemporary Ismaili response to evolution in academic literature. I argue that Shīʿī Ismaili Muslims can fully accept the scientific theory of Neo-Darwinian evolution without any exceptions based on four core elements of historical and contemporary Ismaili thought. First, the religious guidance of the contemporary Ismaili Imams, namely, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III (d. 1957) and Prince Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV (b. 1936), clearly states that there is no conflict between Ismaili Islam and modern scientific discoveries including evolution. Second, Ismaili Neoplatonic cosmology is theologically and metaphysically compatible with various models of human origins, including modern evolutionary theory, because it rejects miracles *qua* discrete divine interventions into nature. Third, the common descent of all earthly life easily integrates with Ismaili Imamology, which posts an unbroken lineage of hereditary Imams since the beginning of life on earth. Fourth, Ismaili thinkers rejected the literal meaning of the Adamic creation story and instead interpreted it through spiritual exegesis (*taʿwīl*), according to which Adam was a naturally born human whose “creation” in the Qurʾān pertains

to his spiritual upbringing; thus, the Quranic creation story poses no obstacle against the Ismaili acceptance of Neo-Darwinian evolution.

This essay will proceed by first introducing the history and intellectual background of Shī'ī Ismaili Islam. Subsequently, the contemporary guidance of the Ismaili Imams Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV pertaining to Neo-Darwinian evolution and science and religion will be presented and analyzed. The next section of the essay introduces the worldview of Ismaili Neoplatonism and analyzes its metaphysical compatibility with various human origin models including modern evolutionary theory. The following section discusses how Ismaili Imamological doctrines on the lineal descent of the Ismaili Imams are reinforced by the evolutionary theory of the common descent. The final section briefly examines how the historical Ismaili exegesis (*ta'wīl*) of the Quranic story of Adam's creation easily accommodates Neo-Darwinian evolution given the propensity for Ismaili thinkers to interpret Adam's creation nonliterally.

#### INTRODUCING SHI'Ī ISMAILI ISLAM

The Shī'ī Ismaili Muslims maintain that the Prophet Muhammad explicitly designated his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib as his religious successor when he declared: "He whose *mawlā* (lord-guardian) I am, 'Alī is his *mawlā*" (Daftary 2007, 39). On the same occasion, the Prophet reportedly exhorted his followers to follow the divine guidance contained in God's Book and his household known as *Ahl al-Bayt* of whom 'Alī was the head: "I am leaving behind for you two weighty things: they are the Book of God and my descendants, my *Ahl al-Bayt*. The two of them shall never separate until they return to me at the Paradisal Pond" (Andani 2019a, Appendix B, for multiple references to this *ḥadīth*). Accordingly, the Ismailis revere a hereditary lineage of 'Alid Imams in the descent of Ismā'īl b. Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) as the successors of 'Alī and the holders of a divinely ordained religious authority called the Imamate, on the basis of which each Imam is the authoritative and infallible interpreter of Islam for the people of his time (Daftary 2007, 81–83). Amidst heavy persecution during the early Abbasid period, the Ismailis organized a highly successful revolutionary *da'wa* ("missionary summons"). The Ismaili *da'wa* established the Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171) in North Africa and later Egypt, during which time the Ismaili Imams ruled as Caliphs and the Ismaili *da'wa* expanded throughout the Muslim world (Walker 2002). Following the defeat of the Fatimid empire, Ismaili communities survived as persecuted minorities in the Middle East, Persia, Central Asia, and South Asia (Virani 2007). The two largest Ismaili communities in modern times are the Dā'ūdī Bohras and the Nizārī Ismailis, each of whom follow a different lineage of Ismaili Imams. The Bohra community follows the leadership of a *dā'ī mutlaq* (chief missionary), who serves as the deputy of a

line of hidden Imams (Blank 2001). For the Nizārī Ismailis, the lineage of Imams has continued in an uninterrupted series through many periods of concealment and manifestation; today the community recognizes His Highness Prince Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV (b. 1936) as their 49th hereditary Imam, whom they refer to as the “Imam-of-the-time.” This essay will focus on the Nizārī Ismailis, hereafter referred to as “Ismailis.”

The Ismailis recognize the hereditary Imam-of-the-time as the authoritative and infallible interpreter of Islam with the same level of divine authority as Prophet Muhammad and Imam ‘Alī. The Imams are regarded in the Ismaili tradition as divinely appointed, divinely inspired, and sinless human beings who alone comprehend the legal, theological, and spiritual truths of the Islamic message manifested in the Qur’an and the prophetic legacy (Andani 2021, 308–10). The Imam, in direct succession to the Prophet, continues the function of interpreting the Qur’an and providing the authoritative teaching (*ta’līm*) of God’s prescription (*kitāb*) and its inner wisdom (*ḥikma*) based on changing times. Practically speaking, the Ismaili Imam functions as the “speaking Scripture” while the Arabic Qur’ān in the form of a recited or written text is relegated to the status of the “silent Scripture” (al-Malījī 1947, 175–76). This doctrine means that the spiritual substance of the Qur’ān is embodied in the living Imam, whose words and deeds serve as the personification of the Qur’ān’s underlying principles, even if they override or modify Quranic commands. An Ismaili Muslim accepts the Imam’s infallible teaching as a divinely guided and certain knowledge. According to the present Ismaili Imam Aga Khan IV: “The Imam must direct Ismailis on the practice of their religion and constantly interpret the Qur’an for them according to our theology. On the spiritual plane, the Imam’s authority is absolute. Ismailis believe therefore that what the Imam says is the only true interpretation possible” (Aga Khan IV 1975). In addition to the Imam’s guidance, the Ismailis developed a rich theological and exegetical tradition over the last millennium, which will be described later.

#### CONTEMPORARY ISMAILI IMAMS ON SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND EVOLUTION

The earliest Ismaili response to Neo-Darwinian evolution is from Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III, the 48th hereditary Imam of the Nizārī Ismailis. While his precise words on the issue are not recorded, Aga Khan III’s second son Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan reported the following about his father’s beliefs regarding evolution:

It was this Islamic sense of unity in all forms of life which confirmed my father’s faith in a God-governed order. He achieved a synthesis which enabled him to conciliate his faith in the Almighty as well as in Darwin’s theory of

the origin of the species which swept across Europe in his youth and generated such heated debate.... I have not forgotten his heated conversations with Professor Leakey in Nairobi when the first discoveries of the earliest remains of man were made in the Rift Valley. (Aga Khan 2009)

The above report indicates that Aga Khan III had reconciled his Islamic belief in God as the creator and sustainer of the Universe with Darwin's theory. While Aga Khan III's broader theological framework will be examined later, at this stage, it is important to register that the late Imam's acceptance of evolution holds immense weight for contemporary Ismaili Muslims. Effectively, an Ismaili Muslim can accept Neo-Darwinian evolution without any conflict or contradiction with their religious commitments since their Imam in his divinely guided wisdom has already accepted evolution.

The present Imam of the Ismailis, Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV, has not given any guidance about evolution specifically. But throughout 1982–83 during his Silver Jubilee visits, Aga Khan IV gave guidance to various Ismaili congregations in Pakistan, Europe, Canada, and East Africa on the relationship between science and the Islamic faith. Below is one example of several religious pronouncements (*farāmīn*; sing. *farmān*) given by the Imam on June 13, 1983 in Chicago:<sup>1</sup>

Remember that in Islam, Allah is eternal, His creation knows no limits in time, nor in dimension nor in location, He creates and He removes and therefore Allah's creation, like Himself, is eternal and what man perceives through science is simply an indication of Allah's continuing creation, for, man's mind itself is created by Allah and therefore the conflict between science and faith which certain people perceive around the world does not exist in Islam, but equally it is important to remember that what you perceive is not of your mind and it is not of your creation and it is foolish to become vain and proud as a consequence of scientific discovery. (Aga Khan IV 1983)

The Aga Khan repeated the key points of the above *farmān* on several other occasions. Overall, the present Ismaili Imam's *farmāns* about science and religion are summarized as follows:

- There is “no conflict” in Islam between “faith and science”;
- God is the all-powerful Creator of all things;
- God is eternal and His creation is eternal like Himself and continuous;
- God's creation is limitless, endless, without bounds in time, form, place, or dimension;
- The human mind and its scientific discoveries are created by God;
- People should not become foolish or vain through science; humility is the correct response.

The present Ismaili Imam's *farmāns* instruct Ismaili Muslims to adopt an *a priori* orientation that true Islam and scientific discoveries can never be in conflict. The theological basis for the Imam's position that science and Islam can never be in conflict is his doctrine of creation—the idea that God is the eternal and continuous creator of all things and that God's creative action is eternal, limitless, boundless, and unrestricted in its manifestations. The Imam's stated position does not mean that science itself is infallible or that science should determine one's theology. Rather, the Imam cautions his community not to overestimate scientific discovery and even clarifies that when the human intellect discovers scientific truth, it is still God who creates this knowledge within the human mind. The contemporary Ismaili may easily apply the Imam's general guidance to Neo-Darwinian evolution. One can fully accept Neo-Darwinian evolution as a scientific description of how life develops on earth and maintain that God is the ultimate and continuous creator of all supernatural and natural processes involved in evolution.

The theological basis for the acceptance of Neo-Darwinian evolution by Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV is found in the public writings of Aga Khan III. The idea of God's creation as a single, eternal, and continuous divine action as opposed to one or more discrete interventions is articulated by Aga Khan III in his *Memoirs* (Aga Khan III 1954):

The creation according to Islam is not a unique act in a given time but a perpetual and constant event; and God supports and sustains all existence at every moment by His will and His thought. Outside His will, outside His thought, all is nothing, even the things which seem to us absolutely self-evident such as space and time. Allāh alone wishes: the Universe exists; and all manifestations are as a witness of the Divine will.

According to the theology of Aga Khan III, God's act of creation is not a discrete event *within* time and space; rather, God's creative action is a timeless, eternal, or perpetual ontological activity in which all created beings are originated by God, dependent upon God, and supported by God at every single moment in which they exist. Furthermore, Aga Khan III rejects the existence of miracles in the sense of breaks in the laws of nature caused by God. On the contrary, Aga Khan III regards the regularities displayed by natural phenomena as the most evident signs of God's continuous creation, power, and wisdom:

Islam is fundamentally in its very nature a natural religion. Throughout the Qur'an God's signs (Ayats) are referred to as the natural phenomenon, the law and order of the universe, the exactitudes and consequences of the relations between natural phenomenon in cause and effect. Over and over, the stars, sun, moon, earthquakes, fruits of the earth and trees are mentioned as the signs of Divine power, Divine law and Divine order. (Aga Khan III 1997a)

Islam is fundamentally a natural religion. All its dogmas and doctrines of whatever sect or school, are ultimately based on the regularity and order of natural phenomena, on the natural inclination of human beings for survival and reproduction, while the religion of the West, Christianity, is based on a miraculous event and faith in miracles, that is to say, a break in that very regularity to which the Holy Qur'an refers on a thousand occasions. (Aga Khan III 1997b)

Aga Khan III's theological vision is very much grounded on the correspondence between God's creative activity, the natural world as God's Signs, and Islam as a "natural religion." The primary form of God's revelatory signs or *āyāt* ("signs") is not the verses of the Quran but natural laws and regularities of the natural Cosmos. His comments also negate the existence of miracles *qua* breaks in the regularity of God's revelatory signs.

The positions of Aga Khan III are very similar to those of the Muslim modernist Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. This is not surprising because the two men were intellectual partners in a larger Indian Muslim modernist project known as the Aligarh Movement. Sayyid Ahmad Khan believed that the Qur'an as God's word and the natural world as God's work are never in contradiction. Like the Aga Khan, Sayyid Ahmad Khan did not believe in miracles and accepted evolution (Moaddel 2005, 63–64). In any case, what is noteworthy for contemporary Ismaili Muslims is the Aga Khans' acceptance of scientific discoveries in general and evolutionary theory in particular without there being any conflict with the principles of Shī'ī Ismaili Islam.

While it may be tempting to localize the Aga Khans' acceptance of evolution in the context of twentieth-century Islamic modernism, the metaphysical principles behind their theological positions are rooted in the pre-modern Ismaili Muslim theological tradition. To understand the deeper dimensions behind the Ismaili Imams' acceptance of Neo-Darwinian evolution, it is necessary to consider the more expansive Ismaili Muslim Neoplatonic theological vision that stems from the Ismaili philosophical tradition.

#### ISMAILI PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND NEO-DARWINIAN EVOLUTION

Over the entirety of Ismaili history, there was no single uniform Ismaili theological expression. However, the most historically dominant and enduring form of Ismaili philosophical theology was a distinctively Ismaili form of Neoplatonic metaphysics, theology, and cosmology. The earliest Ismaili proponents of "Ismaili Neoplatonism" were Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 943) in Transoxiana and the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-Safā*) (fl. early fourth/tenth century) in Iraq. It was soon adopted by every major Ismaili philosophical theologian in the tenth and eleventh

centuries—including Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 934) in Rayy, Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 971) in Sistān and Khurāsān, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 1020) in Iraq and Cairo, and Naṣīr-i Khusraw (d. ca. 1088) in Khurāsān and Central Asia. This Neoplatonic model continued in the thought of major Nizārī Ismaili thinkers such as Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274) and within the later Nizārī tradition, when it was articulated by fifteenth-century Ismaili Imams. For example, the below quotation reported from the hereditary Nizārī Imam ‘Abd al-Salām (ca. 15<sup>th</sup> century) summarizes the Ismaili Neoplatonic worldview (Virani 2010, 206):

The first thing that the Exalted God brought forth was the Command. As a result of the Command, the Universal Intellect was produced. The Universal Soul was produced as a result of the Universal Intellect and the hyle, or prime matter, the heavens, the four natures, minerals, plants and animals were produced as a result of the Universal Soul. In reality, the purpose of creating these substances is humankind’s existence.

Key Ismaili Neoplatonic vocabulary continues to be evoked in the writings, speeches, and *farmāns* of the recent Ismaili Imams, Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV (Andani 2019b, 173–74). Modern Ismaili thinkers who subscribe to Ismaili Neoplatonism include Allama Nasir al-Din Hunzai (d. 2017). The contemporary Ismaili Imams have also endorsed and validated the historic Ismaili theological tradition and its Neoplatonic contents as a normative source of religious knowledge, wisdom, and theological reflection for contemporary Ismaili communities (see *farmāns* of Aga Khan IV in Karachi 2000 and Lisbon 2018). Given its historical prevalence and present-day normative status for Ismailis, this article uses Ismaili Neoplatonic theology and cosmology to evaluate the metaphysical implications of Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory.

The foundational principle of Ismaili Neoplatonism is the absolute transcendence and simplicity of God. In Ismaili belief, the Divine Essence transcends all contingent qualities and creaturely predications including space, time, matter, substance, accident, cause, effect, perfection, existence, and essence. God’s absolute unity precludes the existence of distinct divine attributes within God’s Essence. This is in stark contrast with the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī theologians who affirm several real attributes—life, knowledge, power, will, speech, hearing, and seeing—as qualities (*ma‘na*) that subsist in God’s Essence. In denying the existence of subsistent divine attributes, the Ismaili Neoplatonists interpret positive predications about God in a purely equivocal manner and reduce such predications to negations. For example, “God is knowing” properly understood means that God is the originator of all knowledge and that God essentially is neither knowing nor ignorant (Shahrastānī 2001, 43–48). The Ismailis applied this dual negation to every divine predication including existence: God is neither existent nor nonexistent and He transcends both being and

nonbeing. Ismaili theology affirms God's transcendence and oneness by way of apophysis: "We establish the absolute transcendence (*tanzīh*) of our Originator through the use of these phrases in which a negative and a negative of a negative apply to the thing denied" (al-Sijistānī quoted in Walker 1993, 78).

In line with this apophatic theology, the Ismailis emphasized the radical contingency, dependency, and createdness of everything other than God. In other words, God is the absolute creator or originator of all things, which always depend upon God for their existence at any moment. This means that God is eternally and perpetually originating contingent existence through a unique, eternal, and unchanging divine action. The pre-modern Ismailis metaphorically designated God's perpetual creative action as God's word (*kalimat Allāh*) or God's command (*amr Allāh*) based on the Quranic refrain that God creates by simply saying "Be" (Walker 1994, 50–58; 100–09). This is exactly what Aga Khan III (1954) articulated in his Memoirs as quoted earlier: "The creation according to Islam is not a unique act in a given time but a perpetual and constant event; and God supports and sustains all existence at every moment by His will and His thought." Because God is simple and timeless, God's creative action (His word or command) is likewise singular and atemporal. In other words, God's creative action does not change or cease, nor is it followed by subsequent discrete divine actions. As we will see, this has important implications for the Ismaili acceptance of Neo-Darwinian evolution.

The first contingent being and the first effect of God's creative command is the Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kull*) or the First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*). The Intellect is an eternal, incorporeal, and perfect being that radiates intelligible light and encompasses all that can and does exist. It contains the forms, essences, or archetypes of all things including qualities and eternal necessary truths. The Intellect is eternal, self-sufficient, perfect, living, intellecting, truth, and perpetually united with God's creative command. The primary activity of the Intellect is its blissful self-contemplation through which the Intellect attests to its own contingency as the creation of God (Khusraw 1949, 43–46). In Ismaili theology, the Universal Intellect possesses the divine names, attributes, and predications that the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, and traditional Islamic theology ascribe to God: the Intellect is the living, the knowing, the powerful, the first, the last, the manifest, the hidden, the seeing, the hearing, the exalted, the compassionate, the light, the sustainer, and the unmoved mover; it functions as the "Face of God" in the spiritual and material worlds (Andani 2019b). The Intellect is eternal in its essence and in its activity. Like the sun radiating light, Intellect continuously emanates intelligible forms and eternal truths upon all creatures (Walker 1993, 87–94; Walker 1994, 47–61). Given its exalted status, al-Sijistānī describes the Intellect as the "Lord of Lords" (*rabb al-arbāb*) and "the wellspring of all corporeal and spiritual light" who

undertakes the governance (*tadbīr*) of the spiritual and corporeal worlds (al-Sijistani 2016, 3).

The eternal emanation from the Universal Intellect results in the creation of a second incorporeal being: this second hypostasis, which spiritually emanates from the Intellect, is called the Universal Soul (*al-naḥs al-kullī*). The Soul, unlike Intellect, is not perfect in actuality; it is perfect only in potentiality and cannot fully encompass the Intellect's emanations. The Soul, therefore, seeks to attain the perfection of the Intellect and engages in spiritual action or motion toward this end or telos. The Soul's motion emanates Prime Matter (*ḥayūla*) and its quiescence emanates Form (*ṣūra*) (Walker 1994, 64–66). The conjunction of Prime Matter and Form produces Nature (*al-ṭabīʿa*). Through the mediation of Nature, the Soul generates the corporeal or natural world as a constrained “image” of the Intellect and continuously infuses the corporeal world with intelligible forms. Through the mediation of Nature, the Universal Soul produces, sustains, and regulates the physical world and its goal-directed motions including the laws of nature. Through the interaction and mixing of its elements and substance, the corporeal world gives rise to the natural living kingdoms (*al-mawāḥid*): minerals, plants, animals, and human beings. Through humanity, the Universal Soul produces human souls that resemble it and share in its telos. Every human soul is created to strive toward spiritual perfection in knowledge and virtue by becoming an image of the Universal Intellect; this process enables the Universal Soul to achieve its own perfection. In the words of the Ismaili philosopher Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. ca. 1088): “The [Universal] Soul is the architect of corporeal world and it is the Soul which started the movement of this world. The purpose of that activity which it develops is the search for perfection and this is attained in the eminent persons who appear in this world...The object of its producing this world was to produce souls in order that in them the Soul would become perfect.” (Khusraw 1949, 49).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the corporeal world is a locus of manifestation of the Universal Intellect produced and continuously governed by the Universal Soul through the mediation of Nature; the corporeal world with its ordered behavior is “intellectual benefits corporealized” (*al-fawā'id al-'aqliyya al-mujassama*) or “embodied intellect” (*'aql mujassam*) (Walker 1993, 92). Every level of being in the cosmic hierarchy functions as a limited reflection of the level superior to it: the corporeal world and human souls reflect the Universal Soul; the Universal Soul reflects the Universal Intellect; and the Universal Intellect is the receptacle of God's creative command. Stated differently, the corporeal world and human souls are “within” the horizon of the Universal Soul; the Universal Soul is “within” the Universal Intellect; and the Universal Intellect is circumscribed by God's command (Walker 1994, 53).

God's creative action—the command or word of God—flows throughout the cosmic hierarchy from the Intellect to the corporeal world and is

reflected within the limits of each level. The Brethren of Purity describe this cosmogony as follows (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' in Ebstein 2013, 49):

The Word of God (*kalimat Allāh*) is continuously connected to [the world], reinforcing it with abundance (*ifāḍa*) and benevolence in order that it be complete and continue existing. [The Word] begins its flow (*ḥayyihā*) through its unification with the First Originated Being (*al-mubdā' al-awwal*), the Active Intellect, then, through the mediation of the Intellect, [the Word reaches] the Universal Soul, the passive intellect; then through the mediation of the Universal Soul, [it reaches] Prime Matter; then, through the mediation of Prime Matter, the Absolute Body.

The continuous flow of God's word or creative act maintains the very order (*nizām*) of creation, which would otherwise disintegrate (Baffioni 2017, 58–59). Since the emanation of God's creative action is perpetual and continuously renewed, the Ismaili Neoplatonic worldview requires no miracles in the sense of temporally discrete divine interventions in the natural order. This position is shared by the contemporary Christian theologian McCabe who writes (2005, 6–7):

Again it is clear that God cannot *interfere* in the universe, not because he has not the power but because, so to speak, he has too much; to interfere you have to be an alternative to, or alongside, what you are interfering with. If God is the cause of everything, there is nothing that he is alongside.... Every action in the world is an action of God; not because it is not an action of a creature but because it is by God's action that the creature is *itself* and has its *own* activity.

McCabe's position on divine action dovetails with the Ismaili Neoplatonic perspective. The entire created order—from the Universal Intellect to every subatomic particle—at each moment of its existence is being sustained by God's singular, timeless, and perpetual creative action. Therefore, to speak of divine interventions into the natural world is redundant. In other words, you cannot interfere in something you are already and always doing. By the same reasoning, Ismaili philosophers affirmed that even the Universal Soul—the demiurge and proximate cause of the corporeal world—never alters its continuous creative activity. This is because the Soul is always creating, governing, and regulating the Cosmos according to an unchanging intelligible emanation it receives from the Universal intellect, as explained by al-Sijistānī:

The Universal Soul lacks nothing she might want for the sphere to be at its utmost perfection and limit in its movements, and she arranges them however she wishes, determining according to what she learns from her own cause, which is the intellect.... Soul has no need to change anything in their circumstances; nor is the compulsion that emerges in their movements and actions alien to the wishes of Universal Soul.... With respect to the occurrence of variances due to the motion of the sphere, as in the case of earthquakes, lightning, drought, epidemics, fire, flood, and

the like, relating any one of these to a determination of the Soul at the time that it happens is extremely repugnant, since temporal determination at a specific time is a form of deficiency. The Preceder [Universal Intellect] emanated to the Follower [Universal Soul] a faculty that makes it free, in organizing the physical world, from having to renew its original determination. Rather, it determines but once, basing itself on a single rational acquisition of knowledge according to which it organizes the world in a sublime order with nothing in its movements varying from this original determination. (Walker 1994, 74–75)

According to al-Sijistānī's above explanation, the Universal Soul is continuously guiding the motions of the physical world according to its unchanging providential determination, which is itself an emanation from the Universal Intellect. This means that specific natural occurrences like earthquakes, pandemics, and the like should never be understood of as particular interventions of the Universal Soul. In other words, the Universal Soul does not send down lightning or earthquakes to punish people. The Universal Soul never alters its governance and regulation of the Cosmos because it is constantly receiving the best possible determination as guidance from the Intellect, which helps the Universal Soul guide all creatures toward their respective telos. Every creaturely thing in the Cosmos receives and manifests the emanations of the Universal Intellect and Soul according to its natural spiritual capacity; the differences in capacities account for the diversity, perpetuation, and corruption of various natural phenomena (Tūsi 2005, 30).

Overall, Ismaili Neoplatonism regards the creative action of God, the intelligible emanation of the Universal Intellect, and the demiurgic activity of the Universal Soul as unchanging and perpetual actions that preclude any notion of discrete divine interventions in the natural world. In other words, the sheer existence and law-like behavior of the natural world under Ismaili Neoplatonism is the manifestation and effect of a single divine action mediated through the Universal Intellect and Soul. At this point, one may wonder how Ismaili Muslim philosophical theology can account for Prophethood and revelation without positing any divine intervention. The brief answer is that the Ismaili Neoplatonists held that divine guidance is a perpetual cosmic process of God's creative command emanating upon all creatures through the Universal Intellect and Soul. Each creature, including nonorganic and organic creatures, receives and perceives God's guidance according to its own receptive capacities; some creatures have less capacity to accept these divine emanations while a few creatures have much greater capacity. The perfect souls of the Prophets and the Imams, which possess the highest capacity for this reception, receive the divine emanation as a spiritual nonverbal divine inspiration. The Prophet translates this divine emanation into practical guidance in the form of parables, laws, and ethical teachings and his prophetic translation of God's inspiration

constitutes what is later called scripture, *sunna*, and guidance. Therefore, the Ismaili Neoplatonic model of a single and perpetual divine action is more than able to accommodate and account for Prophethood and Imamate, which are already “built-in” to the Cosmos by the Universal Soul (see Andani 2019a, Chapters 6-7).

Having laid out the foundational principles of Ismaili Neoplatonic metaphysics, we can now assess how it can accommodate Neo-Darwinian evolution. At the outset, it is important to point out that the classical Ismaili philosophers entertained several different theories of human origins within their Neoplatonic model of reality. Al-Sijistānī rejected the idea that God created the human race by the procreation of an original couple; he instead adhered to a steady-state model of life on earth, believing that humans and other species have always existed and were originated by God via the Universal Soul when the Cosmos was created: “Anyone who claims that the Maker created first one man and then created humanity from him by means of procreation puts the Maker in the position of a herdsman like the herders of camels, cattle, and sheep... God’s power, in contrast, is such as to originate the multitude in one fell swoop” (al-Sijistānī in Walker 1994, 75). Al-Marwazī (fl. fourth/tenth century), the Ismaili *dā’ī* of Khurāsān, reportedly believed that the first human beings were created through natural processes where plants and animal life interacted to produce human life and the first human being did not have human parents: “These procreate, multiply, and are corrupted by death. They amalgamate in the corners of the earth to such a point that rational being is thus generated and then itself procreates and multiplies.... The intellect does not deny that mankind comes about in this instance without being generated by a male-female pair.” It is generally reported that tenth-century Ismaili thinkers accepted some form of natural generation for all kinds of earthly life (al-Bustī quoted in Walker 1993, 51).

Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī articulated two positions in his works. One is a steady-state model where humans have always existed in the world. The second is a teleological sequential model where humanity comes into being on earth only after minerals, plants, and animals have appeared and humanity came into being from the mixing of minerals, plants, and animals: “The purpose of the movements of the spheres was mixing of the elements of the natural kingdoms, and since the purpose of the natural kingdoms was the human species, the order of existence necessitated that first minerals, then plants, then animals and then human beings come into being. If there had been no minerals, plants could never have come into being, and had minerals, plants and animals not existed, neither could man have existed” (Ṭūsī 2005, 68). In this quotation, Ṭūsī affirms the temporal sequence of different earthly lifeforms where the human species appears last in succession to minerals, animals, and plants. His formulation suggests that the plant and animal kingdoms served as instrumental

causes for the emergence of human beings. This could be interpreted as a “teleological evolutionary model” of human origins. In Ṭūsī’s view, the entire process of biogenesis is a manifestation of God’s creative command as mediated through the Neoplatonic hierarchy:

When the effusive grace of the Divine Command fell upon the First Intellect, it did not halt there, but provoked the existence of another type of being, that is, the Universal Soul. Likewise, when it fell from the First Intellect upon the Universal Soul, it did not halt there either, but it provoked another type of existence, that is, the spheres. And when it [God’s command] fell from the spheres upon the elements, it did not halt there but provoked another type of existence, that is, the natural kingdoms. And [similarly], when it fell from the natural kingdoms upon the minerals, it did not halt there, but provoked another type of existence, that is, the plant kingdom. And when it fell upon the animal kingdom, it did not stop there, but provoked another type of existence, that is, humanity. But when it fell upon man, it stopped there, for the furthest reach and terminus of creation was sealed with him. Thus, man is a compendium (*majmūʿī*) of all these stages and perfections, bearing within himself a likeness of the entire Cosmos, which is expressed by the marvels of his physical constitution and the amazing composition of his soul. (Ṭūsī 2005, 169)

The fact that Ismaili philosophers regarded their Neoplatonic worldview to be compatible with different views on human origins suggests that Neo-Darwinian evolution can also be reconciled with Ismaili thought as well.

The four main features of Neo-Darwinian evolution are (1) the common descent of all life from a single ancestor; (2) genetic mutations that occur randomly or by chance through heredity; (3) natural selection that perpetuates certain genetic features in populations; and (4) deep time. There are several metaphysical issues that evolutionary theory raises for any theistic paradigm: naturalism, chance, inefficiency, and teleology. While they all merit discussion, this article will focus on the problem of chance and inefficiency because an inefficient evolutionary process based on chance is a foremost theological problem. First, the very concept of “chance” requires unpacking. Malik (2021) has deconstructed the idea of chance in discussions about evolutionary theory by distinguishing four types of chance: (1) epistemic uncertainty about the causes of genetic mutations; (2) epistemic inability to know the causes of genetic mutations; (3) there being no physical causes for genetic mutations; and (4) there being no cause *whatsoever* for genetic mutations. The first two types of chance pose no real issue for Ismaili Neoplatonic theology. It is quite possible that humans cannot or will never be able to ascertain the physical causes of genetic mutations in the evolutionary process due to epistemic limitations. But such epistemic limits have no bearing upon the metaphysical foundations of evolution. If one supposes that the genetic mutations occur to unknowable physical causes, it would still be the case that these causes

are themselves the effects of God's perpetual creative command emanating through the mediation of the Universal Intellect and Universal Soul.

The third type of chance—the lack of physical causes for genetic mutations—is also compatible with Ismaili Neoplatonic cosmology. In fact, it opens pathways to new metaphysical models for theistic evolution. It was stated earlier that classical and contemporary Ismaili authorities rejected miracles. The meaning of “miracles” in the Ismaili usage means the following: (a) changes in the action of God, Universal Intellect or Universal Soul; and/or (b) suspensions of the laws (regularities) within nature (al-Sijistānī 2011, 204–07). However, the Ismaili rejection of miracles in these respects does not entail the rejection of physical phenomena having immaterial causes. The Ismaili Neoplatonic model maintains that the entire physical or “natural” order is caused, sustained, and governed by the Universal Soul and constantly receiving its emanation. In other words, in the Ismaili perspective, if one traced back every natural substance or process to its particular cause, one would eventually arrive at one or more metaphysical causes that depend upon the Universal Soul. In other words, whatever the natural order of causes, the metaphysical cause is always active and present: “Even within the order of physical causes, one has to take into account the simultaneous presence of the immanent metaphysical Cause: if a seed is the immediate cause of a plant, it is because the divine archetype intervenes in the physical causality” (Schuon in De Beer 2018). Therefore, Ismaili Neoplatonism in principle is compatible with the possibility that specific processes or substances in nature lack physical causes but still have metaphysical causes. If one unpacks the view that the mechanism of Neo-Darwinian evolution lacks a physical cause, one must conclude that “chance” genetic mutations are either the direct effects of a metaphysical cause or the indirect effects of a metaphysical cause. The metaphysical cause(s) would either be the Universal Soul itself or intermediary metaphysical causes that emanate from the Universal Soul. In either case, this causal model is compatible with Ismaili Neoplatonic cosmology. It simply entails that the Universal Soul plays a more direct role in directing the evolutionary process by directly or indirectly causing the genetic mutations within an organism's DNA; this remains consistent with the general Neoplatonic belief that the Universal Soul as the demiurge continuously contemplates the intelligible forms or archetypes in the Universal Intellect and inscribes them upon Prime Matter to generate the corporeal or physical world. Huston Smith, who accepts both evolution and Neoplatonic cosmology, explained this idea as follows: “In the celestial realm the species are never absent; their essential forms or archetypes reside there from an endless beginning. As earth ripens to receive them, each in its turn drops to the terrestrial plane and, donning the world's fabric, gives rise to a new life form” (Smith 1976, 139).

The fourth type of chance, in which genetic mutations have no physical or metaphysical causes whatsoever, is not compatible with Ismaili metaphysics or any theistic framework. But the claim that genetic mutations are wholly uncaused can neither be demonstrated empirically nor philosophically. It is, at best, a philosophical assertion or prejudice that lacks evidence or argument. Sweetman has cautioned against the somewhat hasty position that genetic mutations are wholly uncaused: “We overlook the fact that for every effect that occurs in biology, there is a specific cause for this effect, including every supposedly (‘chance’ or ‘random’) mutation, and for every environmental change, right back to the beginning of time” (Sweetman quoted in Malik 2021, 199).

Some philosophers hold that Neo-Darwinian evolution contradicts the Neoplatonic belief that the essences or archetypes of all species are eternal and unchanging. The foremost critic of evolution on such grounds is Seyyed Hossein Nasr, as he once wrote: “A species is an ‘idea’ in the Divine Mind with all its possibilities. It is not an individual reality but an archetype, and as such it lies beyond limitations and beyond change” (Nasr in Malik 2021, 114–15). The crux of Nasr’s claim is that every earthly “species” is identical to an eternal archetype in the Universal Intellect and that the species never actually “evolve” on earth. However, this is not the only possible application of Neoplatonic ontology in relation to the natural world. Manchester (2001) argues that belief in Neoplatonic forms, archetypes or essences is completely compatible with genetic mutations and natural selection. Scott Turner observes that “evolution has now become a striving of organisms toward disembodied and abstract ideals (niches) that draw lineages toward them as strongly as any Platonic Demiurge” (Chenoweth 2020, 162–63). The Neoplatonist can ontologically distinguish the intelligible archetypes grounded in the Intellect and Soul and the genetic codes of natural organisms on earth. Metaphysically speaking, the Neoplatonic essence or intelligible archetype of every species exists as eternal information in the Universal Intellect; the material manifestation of this intelligible essence in the spatiotemporal world is the DNA or genotype of an organism; the latter—as a limited manifestation of the former within matter—need not be immutable. The evolutionary process of change and mutation, strictly speaking, occurs at the material level of DNA and populations, not at the level of the Universal Intellect, Universal Soul, and the intelligible essences within them. De Beer (2018, 10) rightly cautions that “all definitions of categories like genus, species, and individual are indefinite, since they refer to things that are always becoming... This recognition that the world of phenomena is always subject to becoming repudiates the oft-repeated claim that traditional metaphysics asserts a static world order, which in the organic realm entails fixity of species.” Changes at the genotype and phenotype level occur in relation to the preparedness of the material receptacles that manifest the Neoplatonic

essences, not the essences themselves (Manchester 2001). DeBeer has synthesized the Neoplatonic idea of intelligible archetypes with evolutionary theory as follows: “Metaphysically speaking, the appearance of a new organic form through mutation, as in micro-evolution, occurs in accordance with a morphological plan or structure which is the formal cause, while its survival through reproduction is the final cause or purpose of phylogenetic development” (De Beer 2018, 264).

The fact that Neo-Darwinian evolution looks like a “chance” process from a scientific and empirical perspective does not undermine its metaphysical compatibility with Ismaili Neoplatonism. The Ismaili view that both the Cosmos and humanity are mirrors of the Universal Soul as macrocosm and microcosm helps contextualize natural selection, as Blackhirst explains (2008, 183–84):

It is entirely possible to conceive of man as the culmination of a succession of animal forms, each more completely internalized than the previous. It is possible, then, to conceive of this internalization as the key to “survival of the fittest” – fitedness being a measure of macrocosmic involution - and we may even hypothesize, with Darwin, that chance mutation is the propelling device. That is, life “evolves” from inert matter by chance mutations, and those mutations which give rise to internalized forms survive in so far as internalized faculties – because they are reflections – enable a creature to respond successfully to its external circumstance. At length, a creature (*homo sapiens*) “evolves” that is a virtual reflection of the whole cosmos.... To adapt a traditional symbolism to this, the living entity and the universe that is its environment are as *mirrors* to each other, and the fossil record appears as a process of bringing the mirrors into alignment or into focus, until – by “chance” forces, let us say – they hit an alignment that finally yields a true or near-to-true reflection, namely the human form.

What Blackhirst describes above in his interpretation of Neo-Darwinian evolution is a gradual process characterized by imperfection, imprecision, and inefficiency, which eventually results in the emergence of earthly creatures—including humans—that are best suited to their physical environment. From a traditional cosmological perspective, the human species and the physical Cosmos are mirrors of one another and one aspect of the microcosmic nature of humanity is their “fitness” to their external environment. Many thinkers have raised the objection that such evolution cannot be guided by God because it is quite inefficient. Why cannot God produce the human species directly without billions of years of development? The proponent of Ismaili Neoplatonic cosmology can account for evolutionary inefficiency by observing that Ismaili metaphysics conceives the Universal Soul—not God Himself—as the direct creator and governor of the natural world. As noted earlier, this Universal Soul lacks absolute perfection; the latter only belongs to the Universal Intellect (while God transcends both perfection and imperfection). The Universal Soul possesses potential perfection but not actual perfection. This means some of

the Universal Soul's creative products manifest perfection while its other creative products unavoidably manifest imperfection and deficiency: "The action of the [Universal] Soul is of two kinds. One is perfect potentially but imperfect in realization, as in the case of the creation of the world which is potentially perfect but only [gradually] comes into existence... Therefore the action of the Soul in this world is only potentially perfect, before its final realization" (Khusraw 1949, 52). Therefore, the Universal Soul is unable to form the natural world in a perfect state or process. The natural world inevitably suffers from limitations and imperfection—such as disease, weakness, corruption, and so on—because of the imperfection latent with its direct cause, the Universal Soul. Something like the evolutionary process—involving deep time, inefficiency, and chance-like events—is quite consistent with the Ismaili Neoplatonic paradigm.

In sum, the Ismaili Neoplatonic worldview is fully compatible with Neo-Darwinian evolution from a metaphysical and theological perspective. Ismaili Neoplatonism posits an eternal and continuous divine action in the form of God's creative command, which is then mediated through the Universal Intellect and Universal Soul. This entails that all natural processes in the Universe including evolution are ultimately the products of God's creative action, the intelligible emanation of the Universal Intellect, and the demiurgic activity of the Universal Soul. Premodern Ismaili philosophers entertained various theories of human origins including steady state and teleological evolutionary models. The core features of Neo-Darwinian evolution—common descent, chance mutations, and natural selection—are easily integrated with the Ismaili Neoplatonic vision of the continuous emanation of intelligible forms into material reality.

#### COMMON DESCENT AND THE ISMAILI IMAMATE

The modern evolutionary principle of common descent holds special significance within Ismaili theology. The overarching principle of Ismaili Muslim thought going back centuries is the idea that there has always been a divinely appointed and divinely guided Imam on the earth. In the Ismaili Neoplatonic worldview, the Imam of the time is the human mirror reflecting the Universal Intellect on earth and the Imamate is a perpetual institution of divine guidance. The Imams after Prophet Muhammad began with 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and continue through his descendants, but the Ismailis maintain that a hereditary lineage of Imams existed even prior to Muhammad. The lineage of Imams includes every forefather of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib such as his father Abū Ṭālib, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Hāshim, 'Abd Manāf, Quṣayy, and every ancestor tracing back through Abraham to Seth son of Adam (Andani 2019b, 168). Unlike most Muslims, the Ismailis believed that the Prophet Adam figure described in the Biblical

and Quranic stories was not the first historical human being on earth; there have been countless generations of human beings in the world prior to Adam (Ṭūsī 2005, 65–72). The Imamate lineage in Ismaili doctrine extends back to the very first human being. Ismaili authors describe the first human being on this earth as the primordial Universal Adam (*al-Ādam al-kullī al-awwal*), who was the first Imam of humankind. There are Ismaili devotional and esoteric works from South Asia that speak of Imams being present on earth in prehuman forms, including the popular figures known as the 10 *avatars* of Lord Vishnu recognized in Vaishnavism. The Ismaili incorporation of Vishnu's *avatars* as divinely appointed Imams within an Islamic vision of hiero-history is almost exactly paralleled in the Sunni Sufi tradition of Bengal for which the Prophet Muhammad is Vishnu's final *avatara* and prior Prophets are also recognized as Vishnu's *avatars*. The first five *avatars* of Vishnu are the fish, tortoise, boar, man-lion, and dwarf; these prehuman *avatars* are recognized in South Asian Ismaili texts and prayers as hereditary Imams in one lineage that extends into humanity and includes human *avatars* and Imams like Rama, Krishna, Seth son of Adam, Shem son of Noah, the entire line of ancestors from Shem to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and 'Alī to the present Ismaili Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni. In other words, South Asian Ismaili theology posits a single lineage of hereditary Imams spanning all earthly history to the present day (Khan 2005).

In the early 1900s, some Ismaili Muslim missionaries asked the 48th Ismaili Imam Aga Khan III about why the Ismaili community recited the name of the fish *avatara* (*matsya avatara*) in their prayers in the list of Ismaili Imams. The Imam replied: “When there was nothing but fish on earth, God stood as witness and they must have no doubt to that kind of witness from above” (Aziz 2021). The modern Ismaili scholar Abu'aly Alibhai Aziz (d. 2008) interpreted Aga Khan III's words as confirming the theory of evolution—that the lineage of Imams once existed in the form of aquatic life in the early stages of evolution. On this basis, Aziz both endorsed Neo-Darwinian evolution and explained that the prehuman forms of the Imams, known as Vishnu's *avatars*, referred to the evolutionary stages in the lineage of *Homo sapiens* (Aziz 1990). In other words, some contemporary Ismailis not only accept Neo-Darwinian evolution but interpret the common descent of all life as the very mechanism for a primordial and perpetual lineage of hereditary Imams up to the present day. This Imamate lineage begins with the first living organism or ancestor to appear on earth, continues through evolution in an unbroken lineage to the first evolved human—the Universal Adam—and continues further in one specific Adamic, Abrahamic, and 'Alid Ismaili lineage to the present Ismaili Imam Aga Khan IV. In this way, Ismailis may employ Neo-Darwinian evolution and its principle of common descent to further illustrate the lineal

descent and continuity of the divinely guided Imamate through the history of biological organisms.

### ISMAILI QURANIC HERMENEUTICS AND EVOLUTION

A hotly debated issue within current Muslim responses to evolution has been Quranic hermeneutics. Many of the arguments for or against evolution advanced by Muslims revolve around how to best interpret the Quranic narratives about God's creation of Adam from clay (see Malik 2021, 296–337). The vast majority of Muslim exegetes, Sunni and Shī'ī, read the Quranic story of God creating Adam from clay and creating Eve from Adam (Q 4:1) to mean that God created Adam and Eve miraculously and that Adam had no parents (Malik 2021, 99, 326). The Muslim responses to evolution known as “human exceptionalism” (espoused by Qadhi and Khan) and “Adamic exceptionalism” (espoused by Jalajel) are premised on the belief that the Qur'ān clearly teaches that God created Adam miraculously (Malik 2021, 121–36, 326). This belief of Adam's miraculous origin without parents has impeded many Muslims from fully accepting evolution. The Ismailis, on the other hand, do not face this theological roadblock. As we will see below, the Ismailis do not understand the Quranic Adam to be the first human being on earth and they deny the miraculous creation of Adam. This is only possible because of the distinctive Ismaili hermeneutic known as *ta'wīl*.

Unlike the Sunni tradition, where allegorical, symbolic, or esoteric interpretations (*ta'wīl*) of the Qur'ān can only be legitimized under certain circumstances, Ismaili hermeneutics prioritizes *ta'wīl* (spiritual and symbolic exegesis) to understand the true meaning of the Qur'ān: “All the verses of the Qur'ān, from the opening *sūra* of the Book to its end, each and every one of them, has a spiritual exegesis (*ta'wīl*)” (Ṭūsī 2005, 154). According to Ismaili theology, the *ta'wīl* or spiritual symbolic exegesis of the Qur'ān is known only to the Ismaili Imams by virtue of their divine inspiration and those whom the Imams have taught this knowledge. Practically speaking, this means that an Ismaili Muslim may potentially interpret every Quranic verse through spiritual symbolic exegesis. In some cases, the outward literal meaning of a Quranic verse will be the same or similar to its spiritual symbolic meaning; in other cases, the literal meaning and the true spiritual meaning will be quite far apart (Ṭūsī 2005, 114).

According to al-Sijistānī and Ismaili philosophers in general (Poonawala 1988, 211), Quranic verses about divine actions involving natural phenomena (sun, moon, stars, water, heaven, earth, earthquakes, horses, and so on) and the miracles of prior Prophets cannot be taken literally if their outward meaning contradicts what the intellect knows about the natural world and its laws. Al-Sijistānī maintains that all prophetic miracle stories are symbolic and would be rejected by truly intelligent people (al-Sijistānī

2011, 204). He also maintains that God performing miracles would falsify the divine wisdom (*al-hikma*) that He has established throughout His creation and that this in turn leads to the denial of God as the creator (al-Sijistānī 2011, 207). In other words, the Ismailis see the regularities of the Cosmos as the manifestation of divine wisdom that cannot be altered. Accordingly, Ismaili exegetes interpret miracle accounts in the prophetic stories through spiritual symbolic exegesis: the great flood was a flood of knowledge and Noah's Ark symbolizes Shem, the Imam appointed by Noah to guide his community to truth; Abraham's sacrifice of his son Ishmael was Abraham's designation of his son as the next Imam; Moses seeing a fire was his perception of the light of divine inspiration within his soul; Jesus birth without a father was his "spiritual birth" or religious initiation and not his physical birth; his creation of birds from clay means his spiritual training of novice disciples to make them into learned missionaries (al-Nu'mān 1960, 78, 124–25, 192, 300, 303).

The Ismaili exegesis of the Adamic creation story in the Qur'an follows this same methodology. The Quranic narrative that God took clay, molded it into a human form, and then breathed into it from His Spirit is interpreted symbolically and not literally. The Ismaili sage Ja'far b. Manṣūr al-Yaman argued that the literal meaning of Adam being created by God from clay contradicts empirical observation: "We never see anything appearing out of the animal genus except its own genus and species. How is it possible to suppose that a sensing perceiving beast or rational human comes into being from clay, which is mud, while we never perceive anything except what is naturally born from a father and a mother as a mortal bodily birth?" (al-Yaman 1984, 23). Al-Yaman's rejection of God creating Adam in a miraculous way is consistent with the Ismaili Neoplatonic metaphysics discussed earlier: God's creative command is single, timeless, and perpetual so there are no divine interventions; otherwise, this would entail that God is not timeless or that His original creative action is deficient so as to require a later divine intervention.

According to Ismaili spiritual exegesis, the true meaning of the Adamic creation story in the Qur'an is the spiritual and religious training of a human being named Adam through different levels of faith and knowledge. This Adam had a mother and a father and lived several thousand years ago; he was not the first human on earth, but rather, he was a person who lived at the commencement of the current 7,000-year cycle of history. The Quranic Adam was one of the disciples of the then Imam of the Time, whose name was Hunayd. The Imam Hunayd selected Adam from among the believers of that time and elevated him in spiritual status. But all of this was a spiritual secret that the Qur'an described in symbols by stating God creating Adam from clay:

Adam in reality according to the explanation of the spiritual exegesis (*ta'wīl*) was only one of the respondents of the Imam of the Time.... "God" refers to the Imam of the Time since he is appointed from the direction of God and he acts by the command of God, so the name "God" refers to him. The "earth" is the Summons of the Imam and the soil is the believers [who are] the children of the Summons... Clay is similar to the mature believers because it [clay] is dust kneaded with water, since water is similar to the science of spiritual exegesis and dust is similar to the believers. (al-Yaman 1984, 23–24)

The Quranic account of Adam being created from dust and clay means that Adam was initially at the level of a common believer ("dust") and was nourished with spiritual knowledge ("water") such that he became an advanced believer ("clay"). The Quranic depiction of God informing the angels that "I am appointing a *khalīfa* on earth" (Q 2:30) really means that the Imam announced to his highest-ranking followers that he was appointing his disciple Adam as the new Prophet for the people (al-Yaman 1984, 29).

From an Ismaili perspective, there are no hermeneutical reasons for rejecting Neo-Darwinian evolution since Adam's miraculous creation from clay is explicitly rejected. Instead, the Ismaili exegetes regarded Adam as a human being naturally born from two parents. God creating Adam from clay according to Ismaili spiritual exegesis refers to the Imam's initiation and elevation of Adam from the rank of a believer to the rank of Prophet.

### CONCLUSION

This article presented a constructive Ismaili Muslim engagement with Neo-Darwinian evolution grounded in Ismaili theology, metaphysics, and Quranic hermeneutics. It was argued that an Ismaili Muslim can fully accept and reconcile Neo-Darwinian evolution within an Ismaili worldview without any exceptions based on four reasons. The contemporary Ismaili Imams Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV fully accepted evolutionary theory and modern scientific discoveries because God's creation is eternal and continuous. The Ismaili Neoplatonic worldview is theologically and metaphysically compatible with modern evolutionary theory because it rejects divine interventions into the natural world and regards divine creative action as perpetual. The common descent of all earthly life easily integrates with Ismaili Imamology, which posts an unbroken lineage of hereditary Imams since the beginning of life on earth. Finally, Ismaili thinkers employed spiritual exegesis (*ta'wīl*) to the Adamic creation story in the Qur'an and rejected the literal meaning of a miraculous creation from clay. The historical Ismaili exegesis of the Adam story nullifies any Quranic objections to evolution. Overall, Ismaili Muslims can confidently accept the scientific truth of Neo-Darwinian evolution without compromising their religious commitments.

## NOTES

1. The *farmāns* of the present Ismaili Imam are orally delivered to Ismaili-only audiences and then transcribed into *farmāns* books that are available in Ismaili prayer houses called *Jamatkhanas*. While some *farmāns* have been published and distributed to the Ismaili community at large, other *farmāns* are only available in *Jamatkhanas* or in private collections of individual Ismailis. I am quoting and paraphrasing the Aga Khan's 1982–83 *farmāns* from a private unpublished collection.

2. I have slightly modified Ivanov's translation by translating *nafs* as "Soul" and *jismāni* as "corporeal" instead of "material."

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