

# *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?”

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM ON ISLAM AND EVOLUTION

by Shoaib Ahmed Malik 

*Abstract.* This introduction provides an overview of the significance of the Symposium on Islam and evolution that results from a conference hosted by the Leiden University Shī‘ī Studies Initiative (LUSSI) in July 2021. The objective of this conference was to stimulate further research in the area. Scientists, theologians, and philosophers participated in the conference to discuss the topic from various angles. The selected articles that were accepted for this thematic section are summarized.

*Keywords:* Islam and Darwin; Islam and evolution; Islam and intelligent design; Islam and science; Islamic philosophy and evolution; Islamic teleology and evolution; Islamic theodicy and evolution; Islamic theology and evolution; Shī‘ism and evolution; Sunnism and evolution

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM ON ISLAM AND EVOLUTION

The budding field of Islam and science has been steadily developing over the past few decades (Guessoum 2011). However, out of the many conversations that come under the umbrella of Islam and science, the specific discussion of Islam and evolution remains as one of the most polarizing, controversial, and, yet, exciting territories (Guessoum 2016; Malik 2021). This is likely due to the several challenges the theory simultaneously poses for religious believers, with Muslims being no exception. The following are some of them:

Shoaib Ahmed Malik is an Assistant Professor at the College of Natural and Health Sciences, Zayed University, Academic City, Dubai, UAE; e-mail; shoaib.malik@zu.ac.ae.

- (1) *Evolution challenges design*: One perspective is that evolution competes with or undermines design seen in biological organisms. In resonance with William Paley, some see God as an artisan who is responsible for crafting each biological entity according to a wise blueprint or a plan. Evolution, however, provides a scientific explanation for the origins of species and thus apparently undermines the thesis that biological entities are (directly) designed by God.
- (2) *Chance undermines providence*: Inherent in evolution, or at least the Neo-Darwinian rendition, is an indeterministic process. Some believe that it is unbefitting or impossible for God to create life through an indeterministic process, as it undermines His providence.
- (3) *Chance undermines teleology*: Religion has it that God has intent and purposes. However, if evolution is true, all life seems to be radically contingent. Did God truly intend to create human beings or are we a lucky accident?
- (4) *Evolution amplifies the problem of evil*: Estimates indicate that 99% of all species that ever lived are now extinct. Why would an omnibenevolent God create life through a process in which extinction, animal suffering, and cruelty are built into it?
- (5) *Evolution challenges scriptural details*: Religious scripture contain several details that intersect and potentially conflict with the theory of evolution. These include the age of the earth, Noah's flood, and, most importantly, the creation narrative of Adam and Eve. Depending on one's hermeneutic framework, some or all of these accounts can be difficult to reconcile with the theory of evolution.

An increasing number of publications have tried to engage the particular topic of Islam and evolution in the past decade, with varying positions and foci (Jalajel 2009; Guessoum 2016; Dajani 2012; Elshakry 2013; Qadhi and Khan 2018; Malik 2021). Some are descriptive (e.g., Elshakry 2013), while others are normative (e.g., Jalajel 2009). One of most recent publications has been my own work, *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* (Malik 2021). In this monograph, I look at evolution through the lens of a specific Sunnī theological school known as Ash'arism as articulated by al-Ghazālī. In there, I engage with metaphysical and hermeneutic issues to then conclude that there are several options available, and that evolution need not be a point of contention. However, in my concluding chapter, I emphasize that there remain many unexplored approaches, perspectives, and ideas that require further research.

Despite the increasing number of publications in this area, they are only a handful of studies. To further stimulate dialogue and discussion in this area, the Leiden University Shi'ī Studies Initiative (LUSSI) hosted an online conference, with the combined efforts of Ahab Bdaiwi, Arnold Yasin

Mol, and myself, on the theme of Islam and evolution. The collection of articles in this issue's Symposium on Islam and Evolution, which together explore new frontiers in the area, is an outcome of that conference.

The first article is written by Safaruk Zaman Chowdhury who looks at the intersection of Islamic theodicy and evolution. Building on his recently published book, *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Chowdhury 2021), he identifies two evolutionary problems of evil and then suggests three theodicies—educative, ecological, and aesthetic—that can counter them. While constructive and creative in his approach, he makes it clear that these proposals should be seen as starting points in an otherwise developing area.

The next two articles are Shī'ī perspectives on evolution. The first is by Karim Gabor Kocsenda who examines the understanding of human evolution of Kamāl al-Ḥaydarī, a well-known contemporary Twelver Shī'ī theologian and a creationist, whose ideas have not been fully explored or critically analyzed in this space. He does this comparatively with the works of Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Tabātabā'ī, one of the most renowned Twelver Shī'ī theologians of the past century. The article presents Ḥaydarī's hermeneutic reading that allows for an unscientific rendition of evolution that is deployed for Twelver Shī'ī theological ends. Ḥaydarī focuses specifically on the idea of multiple "Adams" in human and prophetic origins and attempts to link the evolution of consciousness with the Twelver Shī'ī belief in the Parousia of the Mahdī. The second article by Khalil Andani is the first academic perspective on Islam and evolution from an Ismaili Shī'ī perspective in the English language, and tackles both metaphysical and hermeneutic issues. In his view, Ismaili Shī'ī metaphysics, which is a Neoplatonic framework, allows for the metaphysical possibility of evolution, contrary to what other Neoplatonists like Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2006) have claimed. Furthermore, he argues that Ismaili Shī'ī hermeneutics permits a metaphorical reading of Adam's creation narrative, thus relieving any tension between Ismaili Shī'ism and evolution.

The final two articles are written from Sunnī perspectives. Both look at teleology and design in the context of evolution but have slightly different approaches and foci. Building on his earlier work, David Solomon Jalajel (2009) looks at how scholars from all three Sunnī schools—Ash'arism, Māturīdism, and Salafism—understand God's wisdom (*ḥikma*). After expounding their views and finding a common denominator, he then presents the various ways discussants in Islam and evolution resort to God's wisdom to argue for and against evolution. He concludes that the discussants' arguments do not conform with how wisdom is traditionally understood within the Sunnī theological tradition, and they apply subjective or arbitrary measures of God's wisdom to make a case for or against evolution. The second article is co-authored by me, Hamza Karamali, and Moamer Yahia Ali Khalayleh. Intelligent design (ID) has become a

significant cultural force in the dialogue of evolution and religion, and it has gained much currency in the Muslim world. It would not be controversial to state that ID is seen as the default position for a lot of Muslims in the Islam and evolution debate. Given the several design references in the Qur'ān, some see ID reinforcing the Qur'ānic narrative. Critiquing ID, then, is seen as tantamount to critiquing the Qur'ān or its design discourse. We look at ID and the design discourse in the Qur'ān from a Sunni *kalamīc* framework—Ash'arism and Māturīdism—and expose an important difference between the two, and subsequently argue that critiquing ID does not undermine the Qur'ān or its design discourse.

I hope that this Symposium offers much food for thought and instigates further research in the field of Islam and evolution.

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