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Navigating the Gap Between the Evolutionary Narrative and the Islamic Perspective: A Historical Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This literature review explores the intersection of the evolutionary narrative and Islamic perspectives, aiming to explain the convergence and divergence between these two frameworks in understanding human origins. The review synthesises key scholarly debates that address how evolutionary biology's narrative of human evolution aligns or conflicts with Islamic teachings. By analysing contemporary and historical scholarly literature, the review highlights major points of contention and agreement, including interpretations of scriptural texts, theological implications, and the role of scientific evidence in shaping religious and philosophical perspectives. It also examines how these discussions influence broader debates on science and religion and considers the implications for interdisciplinary dialogue. The review concludes with reflections on how this approach might contribute to a more significant understanding of human origins within Islamic thought in a dialogical manner.

Keywords: *Evolution, Islamic, Perspective, Science, Religion, Origin, Dialogical, Historical*

Introduction

The theory of evolution has long been a topic of discourse, challenging religious perspectives on the origins of life (Freeman 1974). Within the Muslim scholarly domain, the acceptance and interpretation of evolutionary theory have undergone an evolution of their own, and the specific interface of Islam and evolution is one of the most interesting, yet polarising discussions in this territory (Malik S. , 2021). This evolution in perspective reflects a dynamic interplay between religious beliefs and scientific advancements, showcasing the adaptability of Islamic thought in response to an ever-changing world (Edis, 2023). Hence, this ever-growing interplay can adopt multiple approaches as suggested by Bertka (2015). A *conflict* approach to science and religion that assumes that either religion alone or science alone establishes the standard of truth. A *separation* approach that assumes that science and religion, by definition, cannot conflict with one another because the two are concerned with different subject matter and are completely independent ways of knowing. Religion deals with questions of meaning and purpose, but the concern of science is how nature works. An *interaction* approach to science and religion is cognizant of the differences between the two and is careful not to disregard the limits of either as a way of knowing. However, traditions and individuals who adopt an interactionist approach are open to reformulating religious doctrines in light of current science. Therefore, through an exploration of literature and theological discourse, we can trace the route of how Muslim scholars navigated the terrain of evolutionary theory, restructuring their perspectives to reconcile faith with modern science.

On one side, the theory of evolution offers a naturalistic explanation for the diversity of life on Earth, devoid of divine intervention. On the other hand, Islam narrates a creation that emphasises a divine involvement in every aspect of existence (Hallaq, 2005). This paper will journey through the intricate landscape where science and faith intersect. It will explore the conflict that arises when the evolution path meets the Islamic perspective, and how individuals navigate through this schism, and how successful the Muslim scholars have been in narrowing the gap between the two opposing perspectives. The paper will review literature of Muslim perceptions; those who fully accept it, integrating it with Islamic teachings; others reject it outright, viewing it as conflicting with religious beliefs; and a middle group accepts parts of the theory but interprets it through a theological lens, often emphasising divine guidance.

1.1 Background to the Problem

Historically, many Muslim scholars initially approached the theory of evolution with scepticism, viewing it as a challenge to the traditional understanding of divine creation as outlined in the Quran (Brink, 2023). According to Malik (2021), the theory of evolution states that every biological entity, humans included, is historically related through interconnecting lineages. Humans, then, are descendants of an earlier species and were not simply created into existence instantaneously. This entails that Adam and Eve, who are generally and traditionally considered to be the first parentless couple of humankind in Islam, must have had a mother and a father. Here, tension starts to brew, and it's the conceptual starting point for the entire discourse of Islam and evolution.

Prominent scholars like Syed Hossein Nasr and Irfan Yilmaz questioned the compatibility of evolutionary ideas with Islamic tenets (Baharuddin, 2014), emphasising a literal interpretation of scripture. The works of these scholars laid the foundation for a cautious and critical approach that persisted for centuries (Jalajel, 2010). Additionally, according to Smedes (2004), Bolger (2012) and Porter (2001), when some theologians inform scientists that certain domains of knowledge are outside the purview of science, e.g. miracles such as Adam's creation, it can

create a tensive relationship, as some scientists may not be able to entertain such ideas. However, according to Shah (2020), Charles Darwin is often credited as the pioneer of evolutionary theory, but an alternate perspective suggests that pre-Darwinian Muslim philosophers had discussed evolution in their writings. Muslim scholars provided Darwin with foundational concepts, shaping what Draper (1874) termed the Mohammadan Theory of Evolution. Darwin's familiarity with Arabic and exposure to Islamic culture at the University of Cambridge contributed to his theory, suggesting that he drew inspiration from oriental literature for his evolutionary ideas.

With the advent of advanced technologies and the increasing prominence of evolutionary biology, a shift in perspective among Muslim scholars became noticeable (Barnes ME, 2021). That is, the proliferation of technology has played a pivotal role in reshaping Islamic perspectives on evolution. Scientific advancements, particularly in genetics and palaeontology, provided new tools for scholars to scrutinise and reconcile evolutionary theories with religious doctrines (Seyed Ebrahim Hosseini, 2014). Furthermore, Alassiri (2020) argues that the theory of evolution should be taught as other scientific theories and biology without Darwin is like physics without Newton. In the 21st century, Muslim scholars continue to grapple with the implications of evolution, incorporating insights from fields such as bioethics, philosophy, and Islamic jurisprudence. Notable figures like Usama Hasan (2015) advocate synthesising scientific knowledge and faith, fostering a more inclusive and open dialogue within the Muslim community.

1.2 Objectives

1. To review major scholarly works that have attempted to reconcile or critique evolutionary theory from an Islamic standpoint.
2. To trace the historical development of evolutionary thought from its pre-Darwinian period to contemporary scientific understandings.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This review leans on epistemological pluralism as the theoretical framework in understanding that there is not just one way of knowing or making sense of the world (Alcoff, 2007). Science and religion often approach truth from very different starting points: one grounded in empirical observation and theory, the other rooted in revelation, metaphysics, and centuries of interpretive tradition. Rather than seeing these as competing claims, epistemological pluralism allows us to explore how both can coexist and offer meaningful insights into human origins, each within its context (Thaddeus R. Miller, 2008).

1.4 Literature review

1.4.1 The Pre-Darwinian Period

1.4.1.1 Empedocles

Long before Darwin, the idea that life could change, adapt, and emerge in stages was already taking root, though in forms far more poetic than scientific. One of the earliest and most intriguing voices in this tradition was Empedocles, a Greek philosopher who lived in the 5th century BCE. Although not a Muslim but his theories offered a surprisingly layered account of how life might have come to be (HALAPSIS, 2021).

Empedocles believed that everything in the universe was made up of four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. But these elements did not act alone. They were constantly pushed and pulled by two opposing forces: Love, which brought things together, and Strife, which tore them apart. For Empedocles, all creation, including life itself, was a result of this ongoing dance between union and separation.

When it came to the origin of living beings, Empedocles had a particularly vivid imagination. He described a time when the Earth itself produced disconnected body parts, an arm here, an eye there, which later fused into full-bodied organisms under the influence of Love. He laid out a kind of evolutionary sequence, moving from scattered limbs, to connected parts, to fully formed creatures, and finally to beings made of mixed and intermingled elements. It is a strangely beautiful vision of organic life growing not through divine faith, but through stages of assembly and adaptation.

He suggested that the early Earth was full of strange hybrid creatures: human heads on animal bodies, and vice versa. Most of these did not survive, he said, simply because their parts did not "fit" or work well together. But some combinations did, and those are the ones that lasted. In this, we get a striking early echo of the idea that adaptation determines survival, a concept that would only fully come into focus more than two millennia later.

Interestingly, he also suggested that the earliest living beings were double-sexed, containing both male and female traits. Over time, various influences split them into separate sexes, allowing for reproduction and the continuation of life. It's a mythic explanation, but one that still hints at a larger interest in how organisms reproduce, vary, and persist. According to the University of Pittsburgh (2008), studies in genetics are beginning to offer clues about how separate sexes may have evolved from hermaphroditic ancestors. Since this transition happened so far back in evolutionary history, it's difficult to observe directly. Most animals had already shifted to distinct sexes long before we could study the process. Still, research into heredity is helping scientists piece together how this change may have occurred. Even so, many details about the earliest stages remain unclear.

It is important to talk about what Greek philosophers said about evolution before Islam because it gives us a sense of the ideas that came along with the translation of Greek works into Arabic. These were not just abstract theories, they shaped the way early Muslim thinkers started asking questions about life, change, and creation. By knowing what was already in circulation, we get a clearer picture of how Islamic scholars responded to, built on, or reinterpreted those ideas within their worldview

1.4.1.2 Al-Jahiz (776-868)

Bayrakdar (2019), in his paper, "Al-Jahiz and the Rise of Biological Evolutionism," asserts that Al-Jahiz, who was an eminent zoologist of the ninth century, pioneered the comprehensive theory of biological evolution. His innovative concepts sparked a scientific revolution, profoundly shaping human thought. Al-Jahiz's evolutionary theory not only introduced fresh perspectives to the philosophy of nature but also left a lasting influence on both Muslim and European thinkers, including Lamarck and Darwin. However, Shayla (2020) stated that there is no evidence suggesting Darwin was aware of Islamic scholars from the 9th or 10th centuries. However, acknowledging past scholars is not to imply Darwin's replication or influence but to enhance the broader narrative of science as a collective human effort.

Al-Jahiz's view on Biological Evolution contains the initial ideas and concepts of many later evolutionary theories. According to the author, Al-Jahiz approached animal classification scientifically, arranging them in a linear series from the simplest to the most complex. He grouped them based on marked similarities and further divided these groups into sub-groups to identify the ultimate unit within the species. This approach parallels Carolus Linnaeus's later development of the binomial nomenclature system, which also categorised organisms based on observable traits (Reid, 2009). However, Al-Jahiz was an early expert in zoological and anthropological sciences and acknowledged the impact of

environmental factors on animal life. He observed species transformation under diverse conditions and explained the struggle for survival scientifically and through folklore. Al-Jahiz detailed three mechanisms of evolution as the Struggle for Existence, the Transformation of species, and Environmental factors.

Al-Jahiz emphasised the significance of evolution through the struggle for existence, akin to natural selection, influenced by the innate desire for self-preservation. He viewed life as a continuous battle between individual existences, where the better adapted and stronger thrive due to a lower death rate. According to Al-Jahiz, this struggle is a divine law, with Allah providing sustenance through the cycle of life and death. Using examples like rats collecting food and protecting their young from predators, he illustrated the interconnected struggles within nature, emphasising the dynamics of adaptation and survival. According to Al-Jahiz's assertion, Allah has created nature in a prodigal reproductive character and has also established a law, which is the biological struggle for existence, to keep it within a limited ratio. Otherwise, the disorder could appear in nature.

Here we see the initial stem of Charles Darwin's idea of "survival of the fittest". He describes the mechanism of natural selection in the process of evolution. He suggests that organisms that are better adapted to their environment are more likely to survive and reproduce, passing on their advantageous traits to future generations. The idea captures that the most suitable or "fit" individuals for a given environment are more likely to thrive and contribute to the continuation of their species. It doesn't necessarily imply physical strength but rather the adaptability and reproductive success of an organism in its specific ecological context (Malik 2022).

Lastly, on the transformation of species, al-Jahiz hinted at the changes in animals caused by migration and environmental factors; he believed food, climate, and shelter influence species both biologically and psychologically, prompting a challenging struggle for survival. In altered environments, certain traits with survival advantages change successive generations, enhancing organisms' adaptability. This process ensures the survival of well-adapted individuals, allowing them to reproduce and pass on these beneficial traits to their offspring (Bayrakdar 1983). Al-Jahiz's idea centres on the concept of the use and disuse of organs in animals' adaptation to their surroundings. However, all of what he suggested was strongly backed by Divine intervention.

Here, again, we can relate these concepts to what Darwin proposed on the evolutionary ideas regarding transformation and adaptation. According to Darwin, species change and adapt to their environment through the accumulation of favourable traits over successive generations. Environmental factors play a crucial role in this transformation, as organisms with traits better suited to their surroundings are more likely to survive and reproduce. He asserted that individuals with advantageous variations have a higher chance of passing these traits to their offspring, contributing to the evolution of species. The interaction between species and their environment, including factors like competition for resources and changes in climate, shapes the direction of evolution. Overall, his theory highlights the dynamic relationship between species, their traits, and the environment in the ongoing process of evolution (Akhmetova 2016).

1.4.1.3 Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406)

Though best known for his contributions to history and sociology, Ibn Khaldun also offered remarkably forward-thinking reflections on the natural world, ideas centuries before Darwin, and touched on themes we now associate with evolution. In his Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldun speaks of life not as a collection of fixed, isolated

categories, but as a continuum, a gradual unfolding of creation (Baali, 1988).

He begins with a strikingly modern-sounding observation: the natural world seems to develop step by step, moving from the simplest forms to the most complex. Minerals give way to plants, which in turn evolve into animals, and finally into humans. At each level, something new is added: growth in plants, movement and perception in animals, and reason in humans:

"The last stage of minerals relates to the first stage of plants... The last stage of plants relates to the first stage of animals... The last stage of the animal world relates to the first stage of man" (Muqaddimah, trans. Rosenthal, 1958, p. 194).

This vision suggests that creation happens not through abrupt jumps, but through gradual transitions. He even highlights how some plants seem almost like animals in their sensitivity, and how certain animals, especially apes, mirror human behaviours in striking ways. While he never claims that one species transforms into another, his words reflect a worldview in which life forms are interrelated and layered, rather than rigid and separate.

Perhaps most fascinating is Ibn Khaldun's treatment of humans. He does not remove us from nature but places us at the peak of it. Humans, for him, are part of this natural continuum distinguished not by a sudden act of divine uniqueness, but by a natural unfolding of faculties that reach their culmination in rational thought and spiritual awareness (Nasr, 2006). He believed that humans are the most evolved form of animals, in that they can reason. Although it may seem that his ideas are like be like those found in Rasail Ikhwan al-Safa, however, the context of putting forward is different. Malik (2021) argues that Ibn Khaldun's view, though recognising a link between monkeys and humans, reflects the medieval idea of the great chain of being rather than a true theory of evolution.Underlying all of this is a deep trust in the orderliness of creation. Ibn Khaldun is not proposing blind randomness; he sees divine wisdom guiding the progression of life, ensuring harmony between each stage. His approach balances a keen eye for nature's patterns with a reverence for its Creator, offering a worldview in which faith and natural observation walk hand in hand (Al-Attas, 1980). Furthermore, he presents a framework for understanding life as a connected and evolving whole. While not evolutionary in the biological sense, his ideas share the same curiosity about how life grows, changes, and adapts, and they remain deeply relevant for conversations that try to bridge science and theology.

At the end of the first part of the paper, we saw that in the pre-Darwinian period, several Muslim scholars, notably Al-Jahiz and Ibn Khaldun, engaged in discussions about evolution and natural selection, offering insights that anticipated some aspects of Darwin's later theories. What distinguished their perspective was the acknowledgement of divine power intertwined with the natural processes they observed. Al-Jahiz, an early zoologist, highlighted the interconnectedness of species and the impact of environmental factors on adaptation. Ibn Khaldun, a renowned historian and philosopher, also touched upon the concept of natural selection, recognising that environmental factors influenced the survival of species.

The key distinction lies in their integration of divine elements into these observations. Muslim scholars of this era often saw the natural world as a manifestation of divine wisdom. According to these scholars, studying nature was a form of worship, a way to understand Allah's signs. So, exploring how life changes or develops was not seen as a rebellion against Allah but a way of witnessing His power. This holistic approach to the study of nature reflects a synthesis of scientific inquiry and religious reverence during the pre-Darwinian period in Islamic scholarly works.

Similarly, the Rasail Ikhwan al-Safa serve as a profound example of how one can study natural phenomena objectively while still acknowledging the Creator and understanding His wisdom in creation. The Rasail demonstrates a harmonious blend of scientific inquiry and spiritual understanding, showing that it is possible to explore and appreciate the natural world without altering its essence and maintaining the stance of divine creation.

For example, the Rasail discusses the anatomy and physiology of humans and animals, emphasising the complexity and perfection of the body's design as evidence of the Creator's wisdom. They highlight how every part of the body has a specific purpose and function, suggesting a divine approach. On the other hand, Darwin, in On the Origin of Species, explains the anatomical similarities and differences between species through common ancestry and adaptive changes over time. His explanations are rooted in observable phenomena and empirical evidence, without invoking divine intervention.

Furthermore, the Rasail often discusses ethical and moral issues, linking them to the natural order and the Creator's will. They argue that understanding the natural world and its laws can lead to a better understanding of ethical conduct, as both are seen as expressions of divine wisdom. While in The Descent of Man Darwin explores the evolution of human morality, suggesting that ethical behaviour may have evolved because it provides survival advantages. His approach is more focused on the social and biological origins of morality rather than its connection to a divine plan, like what Hariri (2015) quoted in his book, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind on how homo sapiens were able to extinct other similar species through their social and moral skills.

Although Malik (2019) makes a clear distinction between modern evolutionary theory and the Great Chain of Being (GCB), arguing that many classical Muslim thinkers have been wrongly interpreted through a modern scientific lens, it's also true that discussions resembling evolutionary ideas existed well before Darwin. Thinkers like al-Jahiz, Ibn Khaldun, and the Ikhwan al-Safa wrote about the natural world in ways that suggest an awareness of biological change, even if not in the Darwinian sense. One could respectfully disagree with Malik's strict separation by pointing out that many Muslim scholars, both those who supported or rejected evolution after Darwin, relied deeply on the Qur'an and the works of early Muslim thinkers when forming their positions (Malik, Ziermann, & Diogo, 2017). Their interpretations, whether literal or philosophical, show that Islamic thought has long engaged with questions of origin, transformation, and the diversity of life, albeit in its own theological and metaphysical terms.

1.4.2 Darwinian Period

During the time of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the theory of evolution, particularly as articulated in his 1859 work On the Origin of Species, sparked significant global debate. However, discussions about Darwin's theory in the Muslim world were relatively limited during the 19th century, and few notable Muslim scholars wrote extensively on the topic. That said, a few Muslim scholars from that era did engage with ideas related to evolution, although not all directly responded to Darwin's theory.

Some of these scholars include Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan, an influential Muslim reformer and scholar in British India. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was concerned with reconciling Islamic teachings with modern scientific knowledge. While he did not directly address Darwin's theory, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was open to the idea of evolution and sought to harmonise it with Islamic teachings. He argued that the Quran should not be interpreted in ways that contradict established scientific facts. His views were generally in favour of modern

science and its compatibility with Islam, though he did not endorse all aspects of Darwin's theory. However, his efforts were rejected by Islamists such as Mawdudi and other traditional scholars of that period.

1.4.2.1 Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898)

The engagement of South Asian Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution reflects a wide range of perspectives, from attempts to reconcile the theory with Islamic teachings to outright rejection. In his work, Responses of South Asian Muslims to the Theory of Evolution, Martin Riexinger (2020) provides a comprehensive overview of these varied responses, highlighting the complexities within the South Asian Muslim community's engagement with evolutionary theory.

Riexinger identifies two prominent figures in South Asian Islamic modernism, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Abu'l-Kalam Azad, who sought to demonstrate the compatibility of evolution with the Qur'an. Syed Ahmad Khan argued for an allegorical interpretation of Qur'anic creation narratives, suggesting that these could be harmonised with evolutionary concepts. Similarly, Azad accepted evolution but integrated it into an Islamic framework, proposing that the evolutionary process could be understood as part of Allah's design. These modernist approaches reflect an attempt to reconcile scientific advancements with religious doctrine, a characteristic feature of Islamic modernism during that period.

Sir Syed's efforts to reconcile evolution with Islamic theology were rooted in his belief in the compatibility of science and religion. As Irfan Habib (2000) notes, Sir Syed argued that the Quran's teachings could be harmonised with modern scientific theories if interpreted in a non-literal and contextual manner. He believed that the Quran was meant to convey moral and spiritual truths, and that its descriptions of the natural world were intended to be understood in a manner appropriate to the knowledge of its original audience.

According to Masarwa (2012), Sir Syed did not see a fundamental conflict between the theory of evolution and the teachings of Islam. In his Quranic exegesis, particularly in his Tafsir al-Quran, Sir Syed argued that the Quran's verses related to the creation of life should not be interpreted literally but rather understood metaphorically or allegorically. He believed that the Quran was not a scientific text but a spiritual guide, and thus its descriptions of natural phenomena should be viewed through the lens of contemporary scientific understanding.

Scholars such as Ayesha Jalal (2000) have highlighted that Sir Syed's acceptance of evolution was part of his broader intellectual project to modernise Muslim thought. He was influenced by the idea that the natural world operates according to Allah's laws, and that scientific discoveries, including the theory of evolution, were simply uncovering these divine laws. Therefore, for Sir Syed, accepting evolution was not a rejection of religious belief but an affirmation of the belief that Allah's creation was both orderly and understandable through reason.

In contrast, Islamist thinkers like Mawdudi and other traditional scholars largely rejected the theory of evolution, viewing it as incompatible with Islamic teachings. Mawdudi criticised evolution for promoting materialism and atheism, arguing that it undermined the belief in a consciously designed universe. His perspective represents a broader trend among conservative Islamic scholars who maintain a clear distinction between divine creation and scientific theories that exclude the notion of Allah Ta'ala. However, scholars like Moosvi (2015) have examined how Sir Syed's critique of literalism was part of his broader reformist agenda. He believed that Muslims needed to engage with modern science and reinterpret their religious texts in a way that was consistent with contemporary knowledge. By advocating for a more flexible

and rational approach to Quranic interpretation, Sir Syed sought to create a framework in which Muslims could embrace modernity without abandoning their religious identity.

Riexinger also contextualises these responses within the broader socio-political landscape, noting that, unlike in Turkey, the theory of evolution did not provoke widespread opposition among South Asian Muslims. This lack of widespread opposition may be attributed to lower levels of awareness among religious scholars and the absence of significant ideological pressure from adversaries of Islamic groups. This contrasts with other Muslim-majority regions, where the debate over evolution has been more pronounced. According to Tan (2017), during the colonial and post-colonial periods, Muslim societies were increasingly exposed to Western science, rationalism, and secular education systems. Furthermore, Darwin's ideas were introduced not just as scientific hypotheses but as part of the broader modern worldview that was shaping law, education, medicine, and progress. Therefore, Many Muslim intellectuals, especially reformers, felt the need to engage with modern science to demonstrate Islam's compatibility with rational thought.

Furthermore, Riexinger provides a historical backdrop to these discussions, explaining that while some Western scientific theories, such as post-Copernican astronomy, were eventually integrated into Islamic thought, Darwin's theory of evolution has remained contentious. This ongoing tension is partly due to the theory's implications for teleology and anthropocentrism, which challenge traditional Islamic views on the purpose and significance of human life.

Sir Syed's engagement with the theory of evolution represents a significant moment in the history of Islamic thought. By seeking to reconcile evolution with Islamic theology, Sir Syed offered a model for how Muslims could engage with modern science in a way that was both intellectually rigorous and theologically sound. His work remains an important reference point in ongoing debates about the relationship between Islam and modernity, particularly in the context of scientific advancements and their implications for religious belief.

1.4.2.2 Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897)

Furthermore, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), A prominent Muslim thinker and activist, was deeply engaged in the intellectual and political issues of his time, including the challenges posed by modern science. Al-Afghani criticised certain aspects of Darwinism, particularly its materialistic interpretations. In his famous work, The Refutation of the Materialists, al-Afghani argued against the atheistic implications drawn from Darwin's theory, while also acknowledging the need for Muslims to engage with modern scientific ideas.

Al-Afghani wrote during a time when Islamic societies were increasingly exposed to Western scientific and philosophical ideas, including Darwin's theory of evolution. Evolution, particularly in its materialist interpretation, was seen by al-Afghani as a direct challenge to Islamic theology. As scholars such as Nikki R. Keddie (1972) and Albert Hourani (1983) have noted, al-Afghani was deeply concerned with the implications of materialism and its potential to undermine religious belief and social order within the Muslim world. His critique of evolution must be understood within this broader context of his opposition to materialism.

Al-Afghani's treatment of the theory of evolution in The Refutation of the Materialists is inextricably linked to his critique of materialism. Materialism, as understood by al-Afghani, denied the existence of anything beyond the physical world, thereby rejecting metaphysical concepts such as the soul, divine creation, and the afterlife. Al-Afghani viewed the materialist interpretation of Darwinian evolution as a particularly insidious

form of this worldview, one that sought to explain the diversity of life solely through natural processes without recourse to divine agency.

Scholars like Aziz al-Azmeh (1993) have highlighted that al-Afghani's critique was not just a rejection of evolution as a scientific theory, but more fundamentally a rejection of the materialist metaphysics that he believed it represented. Al-Afghani argued that evolution, when stripped of any divine purpose, reduces human beings to mere animals and denies the special status that Islam accords to humanity as Allah Ta'ala's vicegerents on Earth.

Al-Afghani challenged the scientific validity of the theory of evolution, arguing that it remained speculative and lacked conclusive empirical evidence. He contended that observable data did not sufficiently support the notion of one species transforming into another and should not be accepted as a definitive explanation for the diversity of life. In doing so, al-Afghani positioned himself as a defender of a form of Islamic rationalism that was sceptical of theories that, in his view, went beyond the available evidence. This aspect of al-Afghani's critique has been analysed by scholars such as Charles Kurzman (2002), who argue that al-Afghani was attempting to reassert the primacy of Islamic epistemology, which integrates both reason and revelation, over what he perceived as the speculative and potentially atheistic tendencies of Western science.

Al-Afghani was particularly concerned with the theological implications of the theory of evolution. He argued that materialist interpretations of evolution effectively negated the role of Allah Ta'ala in creation and undermined the belief in divine providence. According to him, this not only threatened Islamic theology but also had the potential to erode the moral fabric of society. Without belief in a higher purpose or moral order established by Allah Ta'ala, he feared that society would descend into moral relativism and chaos.

Cemil Aydin (2007) notes that al-Afghani's critique of evolution was part of his broader effort to defend the Islamic worldview against what he saw as the corrosive effects of Western materialism. By rejecting the materialist interpretation of evolution, al-Afghani sought to preserve the notion of divine purpose and moral order in the universe, which he believed was essential for the survival and revitalisation of Islamic civilisation.

Al-Afghani's critique of evolution has been met with mixed responses in the scholarly community. Some contemporary Islamic scholars have praised his defence of traditional Islamic beliefs against the encroachments of Western materialism, while others have critiqued him for failing to engage more constructively with modern scientific developments. Scholars like Ebrahim Moosa (2006) argue that while al-Afghani was successful in highlighting the dangers of a purely materialist interpretation of evolution, he did not offer a clear alternative framework for reconciling Islamic theology with the scientific discoveries of the modern era.

In the second part of this paper, we saw how Muslim scholars responded to Darwin's theory of evolution, and what stands out is the sheer range of perspectives. From genuine efforts to find common ground with Islamic teachings to firm rejection on theological grounds. Thinkers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Abu'l-Kalam Azad did not see evolution as something that had to conflict with their faith. Instead, they believed the Quran could be read in a way that embraced scientific understanding. For them, evolution was not a challenge to Allah Ta'ala's role in creation, rather, it was another way to appreciate the depth and order of divine wisdom. Sir Syed saw no contradiction between science and religion, arguing that

both could work together if religious texts were understood thoughtfully and in context.

On the other hand, scholars like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Mawdudi took a more critical stance. They were wary of evolution, especially when it was framed in purely materialistic terms, leaving no room for divine purpose. Al-Afghani, for example, was deeply concerned that stripping evolution of any spiritual meaning would weaken faith and moral structure in society. He was not rejecting science outright; however, his issue was with the worldview that often came attached to it. However, in a paper, Jalajel (2010) refutes the objections raised by contemporary Muslim scholars who argue that the theory of evolution is unethical and therefore incompatible with Islamic discourse. These scholars contend that the theory's fundamental concepts, such as natural selection, survival of the fittest, and differential reproduction, promote selfishness, violence, and sexual promiscuity. However, Jalajel dismisses this argument by validating Ash'ari and Salafi principles regarding the acquisition of action and Allah's existential and legislative decree.

He elaborates that according to these traditions, Allah has created both good and evil, and humans are granted the choice between them, held accountable for their decisions. Furthermore, he argues that morality cannot be derived from natural phenomena; for instance, while earthquakes and floods may cause destruction, it does not justify humans causing harm. Therefore, extracting principles of immorality from the theory of evolution is considered invalid by Jalajel.

1.4.3 The Post-Darwinian Period

Finally, after a severe friction with the theory of evolution, we arrive at the current period, or the modern era. During this period, we have access to the latest technology, where the past theories can be further scrutinised and presented more comprehensively. The most common feature in this period we may find that scholars accept the theory, however, with exceptions. The literature shows these four most common exceptions: Human exceptionalism, Adamic exceptionalism, no exceptionalism, and theistic group. The latter fully accepts the theory of evolution, however, under divine supervision.

1.4.3.1 Muhammad Husayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1904-1981) and Kamāl al-Haydari (b. 1957)

Islamic discourse on the compatibility of evolution with religious teachings has generated considerable scholarly interest, particularly within Sunnī and Shīʿī thought. While much of the existing literature has focused on Sunnī interpretations, the Shīʿī perspective has been less explored. Scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr have discussed creationist views rooted in Neoplatonism, which argue against evolutionary theory from a Shīʿī standpoint. However, these studies often overlook the diversity of Shīʿī interpretations. The work of Kamāl al-Haydari, as discussed in recent scholarship, addresses this gap by offering a distinct Shīʿī reading of human evolution that builds on the thoughts of earlier scholars like Muhammad Husayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī (Kocsenda, 2022).Muhammad Husayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, a prominent Shīʿī thinker, is known for his cautious approach to evolution. While he does not entirely dismiss the possibility of evolutionary interpretations of the Qurʾan, he remains sceptical due to what he perceives as insufficient scientific evidence to support macroevolution conclusively. Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī's reluctance is grounded in both theological concerns and the interpretative challenges posed by the Qurʾanic text. He argues that the Qurʾan's descriptions of human creation suggest a direct act of creation by Allah Ta'ala, with verses implying that all of humanity descends from a single pair, Adam and Eve. Although he acknowledges that some verses could potentially be interpreted to accommodate evolutionary ideas, he ultimately finds these interpretations lacking in both scriptural and scientific substantiation (Kocsenda, 2022).

In contrast, Kamāl al-Haydari offers a more radical interpretation of human evolution within Shīʿī thought. While he shares al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī's doubt about macroevolution due to the absence of definitive scientific proof, he diverges by proposing a theological reading of evolution that is less concerned with empirical evidence and more focused on the evolution of consciousness and the Shīʿī belief in the coming of the Mahdī. Al-Haydari suggests that the development of human consciousness is linked to spiritual evolution rather than biological processes. This perspective represents a significant departure from traditional interpretations and positions al-Haydari as a unique voice within the broader Islamic discourse on evolution (Kocsenda, 2022).

The paper categorises various interpretive stances towards evolution among Islamic scholars, ranging from strict creationism to more refined positions such as human exceptionalism and Adamic exceptionalism. Al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī's position aligns with human exceptionalism, where he accepts evolutionary processes for non-human species but maintains that humans are an exception due to their unique creation. Al-Haydari, while also rejecting macroevolution, introduces the idea of multiple 'Adams' to reconcile the Qurʾanic narrative with the concept of human progression, albeit in a non-scientific sense. This idea suggests that there were several Adams, possibly as stages or different beings, before the one mentioned in the Qurʾan, which aligns with his view of theological evolution rather than biological evolution (Kocsenda, 2022).

The perspectives of al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī and al-Haydari offer valuable insights into how Shīʿī scholars engage with the concept of evolution. Al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī's conservative approach reflects a broader trend in Islamic scholarship that prioritises a literal interpretation of scripture unless there is overwhelming evidence to suggest otherwise. Al-Haydari's interpretations, though innovative, raise questions about the boundaries between theological exegesis and scientific discourse. His emphasis on the evolution of consciousness challenges conventional readings of the Qurʾan but may also complicate the dialogue between Islamic thought and contemporary science (Kocsenda, 2022).

This review underscores the diversity within Shīʿī thought on the issue of evolution, from al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī's cautious engagement with scientific ideas to al-Haydari's more theologically driven interpretations. These perspectives contribute to a unique understanding of how Shīʿī scholars navigate the intersection of faith and science. However, further research is needed to explore how these views are received within the broader Islamic community and their implications for the ongoing discourse on Islam and evolution (Kocsenda, 2022).

1.4.3.2 Khalil Andani

The article Evolving Creation: An Ismaili Muslim Interpretation of Evolution by Khalil Andani delves into the intersection of Ismaili Muslim theology and the scientific theory of Neo-Darwinian evolution. Andani argues that the Ismaili tradition is uniquely positioned to reconcile religious beliefs with evolutionary science, drawing on the teachings of Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV. Both Imams have articulated that there is no inherent conflict between Islam and modern scientific discoveries, including evolution. They emphasise a theological view in which Allah Ta'ala's act is continuous and eternal, which aligns with the scientific understanding of evolution as an ongoing natural process (Andani, 2022).

A central aspect of this compatibility lies in Ismaili Neoplatonic metaphysics, which frames natural processes as being guided by the Universal Soul, without requiring miraculous interventions that would disrupt the natural order. This metaphysical framework allows for a symbolic interpretation of Quranic narratives,

particularly the story of Adam's creation. Ismaili scholars interpret this story through esoteric exegesis, viewing Adam's creation not as a literal historical event but as a symbolic reference to spiritual development, a perspective that harmonises with evolutionary theory (Andani, 2022).

The concept of common descent, a cornerstone of evolutionary biology, resonates with the Ismaili belief in an unbroken lineage of hereditary Imams tracing back to the origins of life. This theological stance is further reinforced by the Ismaili tradition's rejection of miracles as interruptions of natural law. Instead, the Ismaili understanding of creation as a continuous, divinely guided process supports the acceptance of evolution as part of Allah Ta'ala's ongoing creative activity (Andani, 2022). He sees evolution not contradicting Neoplatonism; rather, it can be seen as the physical manifestation of the metaphysical principle of descent and ascent.

The philosophical underpinnings of this argument are rooted in the Ismaili Neoplatonic tradition, which emphasises Allah Ta'ala's transcendence and the dependency of all creation on Him. This cosmology is mediated through the Universal Intellect and Universal Soul, concepts that are compatible with the idea of natural processes, including evolution, unfolding over time. Andani concludes that the Ismaili theological framework, which integrates traditional Islamic beliefs with modern scientific understanding, provides a robust foundation for accepting Neo-Darwinian evolution without compromising religious principles (Andani, 2022).

However, according to Kianifard (2020), al-Ghazali criticised the Neoplatonic idea of emanation, the belief that the universe flows out from a single, transcendent source in a necessary, almost automatic way. While this concept was central to many Neoplatonic and later Islamic philosophical systems, such as al-Farabi and Avicenna, it did not sit well with theologians who emphasised Allah's will and freedom. Al-Ghazali pushed back against the idea that creation happens as an inevitable consequence of divine existence. For him, and others in the theological tradition, creation is not something that simply happens, it is a deliberate, purposeful act by Allah, who is entirely free and not bound by necessity.

1.4.3.3 Shoaib Ahmed Malik

The ongoing conversation about the compatibility of Islam and evolutionary theory continues to spark debate across academic, religious, and popular spheres. In Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm, Shoaib Ahmed Malik (2021) establishes a model in which Muslims can affirm evolutionary science without compromising essential doctrinal beliefs.

Malik draws an important distinction between evolution as a scientific process, describing mechanisms such as natural selection and common descent, and evolution as a metaphysical narrative, which often assumes atheistic or materialistic conclusions. According to Malik (2021), the conflict arises not from biology itself but from interpreting biology through a lens that denies divine agency or purpose. This framing allows for a more significant conversation, where Muslims are not forced to choose between religion and science but are instead invited to reframe the debate around more appropriate philosophical categories.

Malik's use of al-Ghazālī's occasionalism plays a central role in this theological reframing. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) argued that causation in the world is not autonomous but is entirely dependent on Allah's will and intervention. Malik (2021) sees this as a powerful resource: by applying occasionalism to the theory of evolution, he contends that Muslims can affirm evolutionary mechanisms as secondary causes while maintaining that Allah Ta'ala is the ultimate cause behind every step of the process. Evolution, therefore, becomes

a divinely sustained process rather than an independent or purposeless one.

This Ghazālian approach also informs Malik's reading of apparent randomness in evolution. While random mutations and chance-based processes play a central role in modern evolutionary theory, Malik (2021) argues that such randomness is an epistemological feature of science, meaning that it reflects human limitations in prediction, not actual chaos or divine absence. He maintains that Allah Ta'ala's knowledge and control encompass even those events scientists describe as probabilistic or stochastic (pp. 75-80). Thus, what appears to be random can still be fully embedded in Allah's plan.

Ibn Rushd, in his work Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence), accuses al-Ghazali of misinterpreting philosophers like Avicenna and being unfairly hostile to the philosophical tradition. He defended the role of philosophy as a legitimate means to understand truth, arguing that scripture and reason can coexist, whereas al-Ghazali seemed to prioritise revelation at the expense of reason. However, scholars like Frank Griffel (2020) and Mohammad Fanaei Eshkevari (2015) point out that at first glance, al-Ghazali seems like a critic of philosophy and causality, especially in his Tahāfut al-Falāsifa. But did not deny natural regularities; he only insisted that Allah is not bound by them. His model allows for Allah to create through processes, including the gradual emergence of species, if Allah remains the ultimate agent.

Furthermore, according to (Aftab, 1996), Ibn Rushd strongly criticises al-Ghazali's denial of necessary causality, arguing that such a view makes definitive scientific knowledge impossible. If we cannot trust a consistent connection between cause and effect, he says, then all our knowledge would remain merely probable. For Ibn Rushd, this undermines the very foundation of science, which depends on the verifiability and predictability of natural laws. He defends the idea that causality is fixed, not only as a rational necessity but as a reflection of divine wisdom. However, despite this confident defence, Ibn Rushd does not fully explain why causation must be necessary.

Interestingly, al-Ghazali does not entirely disagree. He acknowledges that human experience can only provide probabilistic knowledge, since it observes patterns but cannot guarantee that those patterns will always hold. In his view, the true source of certainty is not the natural world itself, but Allah, who created both the world and its patterns. For al-Ghazali, Allah is not bound by the systems He created and can intervene at any moment, including through miracles. Thus, ultimate certainty lies in direct knowledge from Allah, not in human observation or rational inference. In this way, al-Ghazali confronts the problem of scepticism not by denying its force, but by grounding certainty in divine knowledge, a position that anticipates concerns later raised in Western philosophy.

One of the most theologically sensitive areas Malik addresses is the status of Nabi Adam [AS]. Classical Islamic theology maintains that Nabi Adam [AS] was the first human being, and a prophet specially created by Allah Ta'ala. Malik (2021) affirms this belief but suggests that Nabi Adam's [AS] physical body could have been created through evolutionary processes, with divine intervention occurring at a specific point to bestow unique features such as rationality or the soul (pp. 153-172). This allows for a synthesis between scripture and science, although Malik insists on maintaining boundaries: full denial of Nabi Adam's [AS] historicity or the uniqueness of humanity would cross theological red lines (p. 172). This aligns with Mu'tazili schools that allowed for the idea that Allah creates through means, even if He remains the ultimate origin. Creating room to see natural processes (like development, transformation, or adaptation) as tools of divine will, not as contradictions of it.

Accordingly, Malik also points out that relying on complexity alone, as in Intelligent Design arguments, to prove Allah's existence does not sit well with the Ashʿarite view. In that tradition, everything in the natural world, whether simple or complex, is a sign pointing to a necessary creator. So, focusing only on the complicated parts of nature while ignoring the rest gives an unbalanced picture.

Like Malik, Andani (2022) accepts that the human body may have come about through evolutionary processes, but he stresses that what makes Nabi Adam [AS] unique is not just biology; it's the moment Allah endowed him with the soul, intellect, and moral awareness. Both thinkers are clear that Nabi Adam [AS] was a real, historical prophet and not just a symbolic figure. While Andani speaks from within the Ismaili tradition and draws on its view of creation as a continuous unfolding of the divine, and Malik comes from a more Sunni theological background, they both agree that scripture and science can speak to each other meaningfully so long as the spiritual truth of Nabi Adam's [AS] story remains central. Al-Haydari, on the other hand, puts forward the idea of multiple 'Adams,' interpreting human development as a theological, rather than biological, progression. This approach allows him to stay faithful to the Quranic narrative while offering a layered understanding of human origins.

In positioning his approach within the broader field, Malik (2021) distinguishes himself from both anti-evolutionary Muslim figures like Harun Yahya (2000) and more liberal Muslim thinkers like Nidhal Guessoum (2022). Yahya is known for his literalist and often pseudo-scientific denial of evolution, while Guessoum adopts a more accommodating stance toward science but tends to downplay the need for metaphysical coherence with Islamic theology. Malik offers a middle path, grounded in classical thought and metaphysical rigour. He critiques both extremes, warning against blind rejection of science on the one hand and uncritical theological liberalism on the other.

In the third and last part of this paper, in examining how Ismaili and Shīʿī thinkers have approached the theory of evolution, we find thoughtful and distinct responses that both challenge and enrich the wider Islamic discourse. Andani's work highlights how the Ismaili tradition, rooted in its Neoplatonic metaphysics and symbolic interpretations of the Quran, finds a natural compatibility with evolutionary theory. Drawing from the teachings of Aga Khan III and IV, he emphasises that the Ismaili view sees the divine act not as a one-time event, but as an ongoing, unfolding process, a concept that aligns well with the scientific understanding of evolution. According to Andani, creation is continuous and divinely guided, and religious narratives such as that of Adam should be viewed through an esoteric lens, not as literal history but as symbols of human spiritual development.

Meanwhile, within Twelver Shīʿī thought, thinkers like Muhammad Husayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī and Kamāl al-Haydari reflect a broader range of theological approaches. Al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī remains cautious, reluctant to embrace macroevolution without conclusive scientific evidence and concerned with maintaining a Quranic view of direct human creation. In contrast, al-Haydari departs from a literalist reading and proposes a theological evolution concept that focuses less on biology and more on the progression of human consciousness. His suggestion of multiple "Adams" before the one mentioned in the Quran represents a creative attempt to reconcile scriptural teachings with spiritual evolution.

1.5 Suggestions and Further Reading

Recognising the early indications of evolution and in the writings of Muslim scholars before Darwin suggests that Muslim educational institutes should not overlook the theory of evolution to their students. Instead, there is

an opportunity to explore ways in which evolution can be better understood within the framework of Islamic teachings. Integrating a unique understanding of evolution into education can foster a more comprehensive and informed perspective, encouraging students to appreciate the intersections between scientific inquiry and religious thought.

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