

Making sense of Islamic creationism in Europe

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Abstract

Islamic creationism has been noted as a serious concern in Europe. There have been reports of boycotts of university evolution lectures and, in one extreme case, even a threat of violence. While religious objections are indeed at play in some cases, our understanding of the rise of Islamic creationism should also take into account socioeconomic disparities and its impact on education for Muslim minorities in Europe. Furthermore, the broader narrative of rejection of evolution in Europe, for some Muslims, may be bound up in reactions to the secular culture and in the formation of their own minority religious identity. On the other hand, the stories of Muslim rejection of evolution in media end up reinforcing the stereotype of Muslims as “outsiders” and a threat to the European education system. A nuanced understanding of this dynamic may benefit those who support both the propagation of good science and favor cultural pluralism.

Keywords

biology/evolution, creationism in Europe, Harun Yahya, Islamic creationism, Muslims in Europe, public understanding of science, religious identity, science and religion, science education, science in schools

1. Introduction

Creationism is now a worldwide phenomenon, and Europe has its own fair share (Numbers, 2006). In 2007, the *Committee on Culture, Science and Education for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe* warned that “if we are not careful, the values that are the very essence of the Council of Europe will be under direct threat from creationist fundamentalists”¹ (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2007). While the report documents significant efforts to undermine the teaching of evolution by Christian creationists, including some high-profile public officials—Polish Deputy Minister of Education, the Dutch Minister of Education, and Italian Minister of Education and Research—it also highlights Turkish creationist, Adnan Oktar, and his brand of Islamic creationism as a major source of concern for education in Europe.

Similarly, Blancke et al. (2013), in a comprehensive study of creationism in Europe, note the activism of Muslim creationists and their efforts to generate media controversies. Indeed, there have been several public controversies in recent years on the topic of evolution involving Muslims

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in various European countries. Some, like biologist Richard Dawkins, have even suggested that “Islam is importing creationism” into European classrooms (Macrae, 2008). However, there is a wide diversity of Muslim ethnicities in Europe, some representing immigrant populations from Morocco and Tunisia to Turkey and Pakistan and others indigenous to Europe. Such a diversity cautions against placing all Muslims in the same category.

If we want to address public understanding and the teaching of biological evolution in schools, it is important to understand a broader context in which these controversies are taking place. This is significant, as Muslim population in Europe has been growing steadily for the past several decades, increasing from 29.6 million (4.1% of European population) in 1990 to 44.1 million (6% of European population) in 2010.² These numbers do not include Turkey (for the purposes of this article, Turkey is not included in the analysis). Even within Europe, I will mostly focus on countries that are included in Western Europe as that is where the clash over Islamic creationism is the most pronounced. It is perhaps not surprising that these clashes have been in the news in countries with some of the largest Muslim populations: France (4.7 million; 7.5% of the population), Germany (4.1 million; 5.0%), United Kingdom (2.9 million; 4.6%), the Netherlands (914,000; 5.5%) and Belgium (688,000; 6.0%) (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Sphere, 2011).

At the same time, it is worth stating that Muslims in Europe comprise only 3% of the world Muslim population. The rise of Islamic creationism in Europe has to be analyzed in the specific European context, and the results may not be applicable elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Before we address the rise of Islamic creationism in Europe, it is important to understand some of the social and cultural issues that define Muslims in Europe. It is easy to categorize Muslims *only* by their religion. However, they represent a diverse array of ethnicities, and the associated cultural attributes shape the form of Islam they practice. Arabs, mostly from Morocco, represent the largest Muslim ethnic group, followed by Turks and South Asians (comprising immigrants mostly from Pakistan and Bangladesh). Consequently, each European country has a different encounter with “Islam” depending on the ethnic make-up of their Muslim minorities—North Africans in France, Turks in Germany, and Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom (Cesari, 2006).

Similarly, an appreciation of the immigration history of Muslims in Western Europe is essential in making sense of the popularity of contemporary Islamic creationism. The first wave of immigration from the Muslim world followed World War II and lasted until the beginning of the 1970s. This migration was in response to the demand for labor for the reconstruction of Europe after the war, and these immigrants had relatively low literacy rates. Most of these immigrant workers left their families behind as they imagined returning to their home countries after few years as “guest workers.” They did not establish a permanent presence and did not really engage with the public sphere. This began to change in the 1970s and 1980s when their families joined them in Europe in the second wave of immigration. The second phase signaled a more permanent presence of Muslims in major European countries, and the demand for prayer rooms and mosques began to increase, so did their engagement in the public sphere. The third phase primarily involved refugees and asylum seekers due to conflicts in the 1980s. In contrast to Europe, much of the Muslim immigration to the United States took place in the 1970s and 1980s, and it involved middle class and members of the intelligentsia (Cesari, 2006).

The state policies and the resultant immigration experiences have also been different in different European countries. For example, Germany has tried the model of segregation, whereas the British government has followed a policy of multiculturalism (Garbaye, 2005; Green, 2005). However, most models in Western Europe have been relatively unsuccessful in incorporating Muslim minorities in the larger society. This cannot be seen through the lens of immigration alone. Today, approximately half of all Muslims living in Western Europe were born there. Furthermore, the Muslim

population in Europe is more youthful than the non-Muslim counterparts, with more than half of the Muslim population in Europe under the age of 30 years (Malik, 2004). Therefore, when understanding the rise of Islamic creationism, we have to take into account not only the socioeconomic differences of the population (related to the quality of education of parents and children) but also the different histories of immigration and the changing demographics of the Muslim population across the European continent (related to their religious traditions and the discussions of these topics in their home countries, as well as how they perceive their respective state policies regarding Islam).

2. Islamic creationism makes a splash in Europe

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been numerous public controversies in Europe involving Islamic creationism. In 2011, an Imam of a London mosque received veiled threats over his outspoken support for evolution. Although the threat was part of an intra-mosque power-struggle, nevertheless, the topic of evolution was used as a strategic weapon against the Imam (Hameed, 2011; Peck and Taylor, 2011). There have also been several instances involving the distribution of materials produced by a Turkish creationist, Adnan Oktar, at various colleges and universities across Europe.

Adnan Oktar, who is more widely known by his pen name Harun Yahya, first came into prominence in the late 1990s through his book, *Evolution Deceit: The Collapse of Darwinism and Its Ideological Background*. The roots of Harun Yahya and his organization are in Turkey, and the theory of evolution is only one of his critical targets (eschatology is one of the major topics of interest for him; see Solberg (2013) for a detailed analysis and a broader context of Harun Yahya's views). However, it is his creationism that has brought him attention in the West and some prominence in the Muslim world. His organization, based in Turkey, has created anti-evolution websites in multiple languages targeting Muslims outside of Turkey, produced slick anti-evolution documentaries, printed out hundreds of pamphlets and books, and has made them available for download, free of cost, from his website.³

The science behind Harun Yahya's creationism may be crude, but his organization has displayed a sophisticated ability to generate publicity and attract controversy, particularly in Europe. In fact, the primary audience for his creationism literature may be the Muslim diaspora living in the West. Indeed, his website was available in many of the European languages even before languages of some of the Muslim majority countries (Riexinger, 2008). No doubt, the physical location of Turkey—located between the East and the West—has something to do with it. But Yahya has also been able to generate a reaction out of the Western press over his creationism, and that allows him an opportunity to present himself as standing up to the “materialist” ideologies of the West.

The more effective publicity campaign of Harun Yahya began in late 2006 and early 2007 when a large number of public schools in countries such as Denmark, France, Belgium, Spain, and Switzerland received, free of cost, an 800-page colorful *Atlas of Creation*. This garnered a reaction from the recipient states that were covered by major newspapers and science journals such as *Science* (Enserink, 2007).

The bicentennial of Darwin's birth in 2009 saw a rising public interest in the evolution–creation controversy. Harun Yahya invited journalists from all over the world to visit Istanbul and interview him. Indeed, there were articles published in the *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *The London Times*, *The Guardian*, to name a few, that presented Harun Yahya as the leading spokesperson of creationism in the Muslim world. In almost all cases, most of his Turkish cultural context was stripped and the primary focus was on the rejection of evolution. This newspaper coverage in itself

is used by Harun Yahya and his organization as evidence that his creationism is gaining hold and that the world, in particular the West, is paying attention to his ideas.⁴

There has indeed been some visible support for Harun Yahya from within the Muslim communities in Europe. For example, some Muslim medical students in England sparked controversy in 2006 when they distributed creationist leaflets backing the works of Harun Yahya during an *Islam Awareness Week* at King's College, London (Campbell, 2006). A similar incident took place in the Netherlands when some Muslim students cited Yahya's work in their essays on evolution (Koning, 2006). Similarly, an outrage resulted in 2008 when the University College London's (UCL) Islamic Society managed to reserve Charles Darwin lecture theater for a talk by representatives of Harun Yahya's organization. The talk was moved to another hall, but the incident was a topic of national newspapers in England (Sample, 2008). Similarly, biologist Steve Jones has made the observation that some of his Muslim students are boycotting lectures on evolution (Grimston, 2011).

Indeed, the organization of Harun Yahya has shown a knack for generating headlines. In 2009, a session in a Vatican -sponsored conference on biological evolution was disrupted by a representative of Harun Yahya, Oktar Babuna. The incident, which appears to have been pre-planned, was recorded by Babuna's associate, Cihat Gundoğdu, and uploaded onto *YouTube* (Pullella, 2009). Similarly, a lecture tour in 2011 by the representatives of Harun Yahya covered France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark and drew public criticism from the science and education communities in each of the countries (Le Bars, 2011).

There are many others in the Islamic world who reject evolution using similar creationist arguments. However, no one has been as successful as Harun Yahya in garnering attention from the press and beyond. In many ways, he has successfully shaped his message for the age of mass media and has substantial financial means to promote his ideas to establish the presence in different parts of the world (see Bigliardi (2014) and Solberg (2013) for Harun Yahya's marketing strategy).

The controversy over Islamic creationism in Europe, however, goes beyond Harun Yahya. As mentioned earlier, one of the more prominent cases in Europe involved an imam of a mosque in east London, Dr Usama Hasan. In early 2011, Dr Hasan gave a lecture at his mosque in which he supported the theory of biological evolution, including that of humans. The talk generated heated controversy within the mosque community. One person went even further and delivered a veiled threat to the imam. The episode was widely covered in the local and international newspapers. Dr Usama Hasan, who is also a senior lecturer in engineering at Middlesex University, had already been writing on a host of social issues. His opponents in the mosque, however, seized upon his comments on evolution and on his liberal interpretation of hijab and used these as excuses to demand his ouster. Under intense pressure, Dr Hasan later retracted some of his statements, especially those dealing with Adam and human evolution (Peck and Taylor, 2011).

3. Contextualizing Islamic creationism in Europe

It is clear that, in the last decade or so, Islamic creationism has become more visible across Europe. This visibility owes much to the publicity campaign of Harun Yahya and the subsequent backlash against it. But why would Islamic creationism get a stronghold in Europe in the first place? This is a pertinent question as the reception of biological evolution is far more mixed in the larger Muslim world. For example, evolution is included in high school biology textbooks in Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, Malaysia, and Iran (Asghar et al., 2014, 2010; Burton, 2011; Quessada et al., 2008; Quessada and Clement, 2011). Yes, human evolution is often not included, as is the case in Pakistan, or there is a continuous struggle to sneak-in intelligent design and creationist elements, as is the case in Turkey (Peker et al., 2010). Nevertheless, high school students in several Muslim majority countries are introduced to the central ideas of biological

evolution, which are presented as a fact of science (Asghar et al., 2014). It helps that a belief in a young earth (less than 10,000 years) that forms the backbone of *Young Earth Creationism* among many Evangelical Christians is virtually absent in the Muslim world (Hameed, 2010). Perhaps, this provides the flexibility to accept evolution of species over billions of years, while still maintaining an exception for human beings (For example, see Everhart and Hameed (2013) for evolution views of Pakistani physicians working in the US). It is not surprising, then, to find courses on evolutionary biotechnology and biomedicine in universities across the Muslim world. Even when it comes to the origins of human beings, science foundations of 14 Muslim majority countries, including Iran, Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Egypt, signed a statement by *Inter-Academy Panel (IAP)*, a global network of science academies, in support of the teaching of evolution, including human evolution.⁵ Pakistan also hosts a government-supported Museum of Natural History in Islamabad that includes an exhibit on evolution, including that of humans.⁶ Saudi Arabia, in fact, is one of the notable exceptions on evolution, where biology textbooks actively promote creationist ideas (Burton, 2011).

It is also difficult to trace the roots of Islamic creationism in Europe to a particular verse in the Qur'an on which Islamic creationists agree upon. The account of biological creation in the Qur'an, just like the creation of the universe, lacks specific details. There are some verses that refer to the origin of life from water (24:45: "And Allah has created from water every living creature"⁷), while others talk about the creation of man from clay (55:14: "He created man from dry clay like earthen vessels"). But additional details are absent. Many defenders of evolution in the Muslim world take advantage of this ambiguity and use these verses to justify evolution within an Islamic context, as long as the special status of humans is protected (Pharoah et al., 2009: 127). Indeed, the epigraph on the Evolution chapter in a 12th grade biology textbook in Pakistan quotes a verse from the Qur'an, "And He is Who had produced you from a single being," and then proceeds to present biological evolution as a fact of science without any religious references about creation or origins in the remaining chapter (Hameed, 2010).

However, the brand of Islamic creationism popular in Europe—the one promoted by Harun Yahya—does not only reject human evolution, but rather it denies any change in species. How can we explain the more extreme position on evolution adopted by many Muslims in Europe?

In analyzing the growth of creationism in Turkey, physicist Taner Edis has speculated that Turkey is one Muslim country where "Darwinian ideas penetrated the most, accompanying the radical secularism of the early Turkish Republic." Therefore, he writes, "there was at least enough evolution to bother religious conservatives" (Edis, 2007). On the surface, a similar claim can be made for Islamic creationism in Europe, as Muslims there have also been exposed to Darwinian ideas. However, as we have seen above, biological evolution is being taught in several Muslim majority countries without a similar level of antagonism as seen among some Muslims in Europe.

The reaction to biological evolution in Europe may be tied to the issue of identity formation and challenges stemming from class differences in the Muslim minorities of Europe. As mentioned above, the rate of unemployment is highest among Muslim immigrants in every country in Europe compared to nationals, and Muslim minorities make up some of the poorest neighborhoods of major European cities (Cesari, 2006). Considering the socioeconomic conditions, it would come as little surprise that Muslim students are under-represented at secondary school level and at post-secondary levels in most countries in Europe. In England, for example, the unemployment rate of Muslims is three times higher than among other ethnic or religious group, and Muslims have the highest proportion of individuals with no educational qualification of all religions (Lewis and Kashyap, 2013).

The lack of education and employment opportunities, and the physical separation of many Muslim communities in poor neighborhoods increase their isolation. The perceptions of Muslims

as outsiders in Europe lead them to form a stronger identity bond with Islam. According to Jocelyne Cesari (2006), this

self-identification as a Muslim is, in many cases, a consequence of the ethnic solidarity maintained or preserved by the socioeconomic conditions of segregation. Avoiding the stigma attached to segregation requires dissociating from the dominant culture as far as possible, reclaiming the stigmatized identity and inverting it into a positive attribute. (p. 25)

Indeed, the fraction of French Muslims identifying themselves with Islam increased by 25% between 1994 and 2001 (Savage, 2004). For many Muslims in Western Europe, therefore, Islam has become a matter of identity.

Their Islamic identity, however, is global in nature and is de-linked with the ethnicity of their parents and grandparents (Roy, 2004: 120). The ease of travel and communication makes this acculturation of religion possible. Public and governmental spaces often play an important role in the formation of such identities. Whereas the public educational system is crucial in establishing national identities, the resistance to such normalization, in some cases, helps define identities of minorities. It is, therefore, little surprise that issues such as the right to wear a hijab, the demand for public spaces for prayers, and accommodation for the fasting month of Ramadan often become contentious (Leveau and Hunter, 2002).

The rejection of evolution may be becoming another contested marker for Muslim minorities in schools. In fact, one can see why evolution may be the target: for many, evolution is one of the prime reasons for the secularization of Europe. Furthermore, it is often pitted against religion in popular press, and many conflate evolutionary biology with racism associated with Eugenics and social Darwinism.⁸ While it still depends on education, social class, and minority politics of individual countries, one can potentially see the reasons behind the appeal of Harun Yahya among some European Muslims. His brand of creationism frames the rejection of evolution in moral terms along with the rhetoric against racism and terrorism—issues that are familiar and relevant to Muslim communities in Europe. These ideas further get reinforced when public defenders of evolution, like Richard Dawkins, not only consider religious upbringing and education akin to child abuse (Dunt, 2009) but also single out Muslim faith schools for stuffing children's minds with "alien rubbish" (Alleyne, 2011).⁹ In the absence of public Muslim voices defending evolution, Harun Yahya's framing is the only alternative available to Muslim minorities, and his multilingual website provides an easy access to this narrative.

This combination of reasons may explain why the rejection of evolution has become part of Islam for many Muslims in Europe. It may not be a matter of epistemological clash, but rather on being a Muslim in a secular, non-Muslim society.

Of course, this is not true of all Muslims in Europe, and it is important to acknowledge diversity of Muslim opinions. For example, Clement (2015) and his collaborators found that in a sample of 11 French Muslim teachers, all first- or second-generation immigrants, less than a third agreed with the statement, "it is certain that God created humankind." The remaining two-thirds accepted the view that evolutionary processes explain the origin of humans (a few of these respondents believed that these evolutionary processes are governed by God, and others saw no active role of God).

At a more general level, a 2006 survey of British Muslims revealed a heterogeneous community that is deeply divided over questions of schooling (single-sex or coed), the place of hijab, and whether it is better to live under *sharia law* or *British law* (Kabir, 2012). In fact, Kabir (2012) notes that the notion of Muslim identity itself has much variability as "for some it is a matter of community membership and heritage, for others, it is about self compassion, respect, tolerance, justice and the life hereafter, or a spiritual association with the *Ummah*" (p. 17).

Some, usually those with higher education, form a secularized bond with Islam and resemble the “pickers and choosers” of other religions in the West and integrate with the larger society (Cesari, 2006). Some retain their piety and consider their religion as a private expression of faith, not unlike the views of other religions in Western Europe.

Since only a *rejection* of evolution grabs the headlines and that this public rejection is often intertwined with identity, it is difficult to reasonably ascertain the prevalence of creationism among those Muslims for whom religion may not be a marker of identity in Europe.

4. Perceptions of the controversy over Islamic creationism in Europe

The controversy over evolution feeds into a broader European narrative. On the one hand, many Europeans see Muslim practices as a direct challenge to their traditional values, while at the same time, many Muslims in Europe feel that they are being forced to assimilate at the cost of their religious beliefs.¹⁰ This makes the challenge of addressing Islamic creationism in Europe perhaps one of the most complex issues related to science education.

In order to address Islamic creationism in Europe, we have to start by asking what does “evolution” or “Darwin” mean for various Muslim minorities in Europe? What is *it* that is being rejected? As laid out above, for a number of Muslims, “evolution” or “Darwin” may simply stand for secularism, which they may perceive as an attack on their Islamic identity. For some, it may stand for racism as they conflate evolution with ideas of social Darwinism. From the limited studies that are available, we also know that some European Muslims accept microevolution but reject macroevolution, some accept animal evolution but reject human evolution, and some accept all of evolution (Clement, 2015; Elsdon-Baker, in press; Koning, 2006). These responses may be correlated with different education backgrounds and social classes, and education strategies must take this diversity into account.

Unfortunately, the media coverage of evolution controversy involving Muslim minorities only reinforces the stereotypes. In the United Kingdom, for example, a *Daily Mail* headline declared “Atheist Richard Dawkins blames Muslims for ‘importing creationism’ into classrooms” (Macrae, 2008). Similarly, a headline in *The Guardian* referred to the former director of education at the Royal Society and Anglican priest, Michael Reiss, when stating that “Migration is spreading creationism across Europe, claims academic”—a not so subtle reference to the Muslim minorities (Butt, 2009). The article goes on to quote Reiss, “What the Turks believe today is what the Germans and British believe tomorrow. It is because of the mass movement of people between countries.”

Such stories not only treat Muslims as a monolithic entity and outsiders but also create a narrative that the default Muslim position is a rejection of evolution. The framing of these stories portrays Muslim immigrants as a threat to the European education system. This leads to the further marginalization of the Muslim minority which sees this as a threat to assimilate. Furthermore, it is *only* considered news when Muslim students *reject* evolution. Once a stereotype of a Muslim position on evolution has been created, it is easy to report stories with the same framing.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this comes from November 2011. In an interview with *The Times*, the British evolutionary biologist Steve Jones mentioned that he used to get mostly Christian creationists, but now some Muslim students were boycotting his evolution classes: “It is a minority of students ... but [the problem] is definitely there and it is definitely growing” (Grimston, 2011). The popularity of this article in mass media is instructive. The headline of *The Times* article itself was “Muslim Students Boycott Lectures on Evolution.” *The Global Mail* reported on it with the headline “Muslim Medical Students Boycotting Lectures on Evolution ... because ‘it clashes with the Koran’.” It was picked up and reported by the BBC and Al Jazeera, by

numerous international newspapers, and was the topic on various blogs on the Internet with the same headline.

Note that this was an anecdote from Steve Jones, and he mentioned a “minority” of Muslim students. In fact, in a follow-up article for *The Telegraph*, Steve Jones explicitly stated that at “University College London we have numbers of Islamic students, almost all dedicated, hard-working and able. Some, unfortunately, refuse to accept Darwin’s theory on faith grounds, as do some of their Christian fellows.” (Jones, 2011). But the headlines give the impression that Muslim medical students are en masse walking out of classes. This is perhaps what comedian Stephen Colbert calls *Truthiness*: “it doesn’t have to be true, but it just has to feel true.”¹¹

These stereotypes also play into the hands of the extremes. The Steve Jones story was highlighted by several right-wing anti-Muslim websites, such as *Jihad Watch*, *Atlas Shrugs*, and *Islam versus Europe: Where Islam spreads, freedom dies*, as an example of the threat of Muslim presence in the West. The Jihad Watch, for example, framed the reporting of The Global Mail story as:

The collective action is an attempt to bully universities into modifying their curricula, or at least to secure an exemption on Islamic grounds from knowing and being tested on what every other biology student has to study. This is a slippery slope, with lives at stake where prospective future doctors would reject basic coursework.¹²

On the flip side, the organization of Harun Yahya cited this as an example of a growing tide of students now supporting his anti-evolutionary ideas and used it to reinforce his own narrative. His organization framed the Times story with the headline, “Darwinist panic in England is on the rise as students walk out of lectures on the theory of evolution!”, and goes on to state that the “prominent newspapers of the British and international press such as The Sunday Times, The Daily Mail, The International Herald Tribune and The Daily Telegraph have reported that in panicked terms”.¹³

The reality, in fact, is more complex even for those students who may have sympathies with the views of Harun Yahya. I recently interviewed one of the organizers of the 2008 UCL event that hosted two speakers from Harun Yahya’s organization. She is a medical student and a second-generation immigrant from Pakistan. At the time of the event, she did not know much about Yahya’s organization but had the impression that they represented the Islamic view on evolution. However, she was disappointed at the unsophisticated level of talk and believed that “the organization [of Harun Yahya] was very bad at presenting the facts of evolution in a scientific manner.” In fact, she was shocked when she found out a couple of individuals from her organization liked the talk. Ultimately, however, she was disappointed for the non-Muslims who had attended the talk:

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

Perhaps this student is not an ideal candidate for Islamic creationism. She is well educated and could easily see through the relatively crude form of creationism presented by Harun Yahya’s group. Her desire to invite Harun Yahya’s group was less motivated by epistemological concerns but had more to do with the idea of defending Islam. During the interview, I also asked her about her own personal views on evolution: she accepts microbial evolution and animal evolution, but

has trouble accepting human evolution. When asked whether there can ever be sufficient evidence to convince her of the reality of human evolution, she left the door open by saying

I think it is important to keep an open mind, and I think it is important if there is evidence to look at it objectively because you should use your brain and your faculties to understand the evidence that is put in front of you.

The student above is a good example of a smart and educated person who is navigating a complex cultural landscape involving science, religion, and social identity. She was seeking a Muslim voice—not necessarily a creationist one—to speak out on evolution, and Harun Yahya was the only alternative available to her.

It is quite clear, then, that the efforts to communicate evolution will not be successful if it is perceived as another effort by the state to “assimilate” Muslims into the European culture. A criticism from outside, even if there is diversity of opinion on the matter, can be seen as an attack on the whole community. Kabir (2012) noted such a reaction in response to negative comments about *niqab* by British politician, Jack Straw, although only a minority of Muslim women take the *niqab*. In fact, some of her interview subjects pointed out instances where Muslim women started taking the *niqab* in response to this particular controversy. The media and the politicians, Kabir writes, were powerful agents that reinforced a negative Muslim stereotype (p. 162).

A recent panel discussion in London featured Muslim theologians and biologists explicitly discussing the question of evolution’s place in Islam. Organized by the British-based *Deen Institute*, this intra-faith discussion had a provocative title, “Have Muslims Misunderstood Evolution?”¹⁴ The panelists included two biologists, two theologians, and a spokesperson for Harun Yahya. Even with a steep entry charge, the hall was capacity full at 850 people, comprising mostly of a Muslim audience. The two Muslim biologists on the panel defended the science of evolution (including human evolution) and eloquently explained the way they reconciled their religious faith with biological evolution. Even among the two theologians, one accepted all of evolution including that of humans, and the other drew the line at human evolution (Hameed, 2013). The audience, judging from the reaction to the panel discussion, was interested in the topic and seemed to represent a full spectrum of views on evolution and its place in Islam.

An event such as this belies the common portrayal of Islamic creationism in Europe. In fact, the usual construction of evolution as a contested and antagonistic cultural marker benefits Islamic creationists as well as anti-Muslim groups in Europe. A nuanced understanding of this dynamic—one that resists this and its polarizing narrative—may benefit those who support both the propagation of good science and favor cultural pluralism.

5. Conclusion

In order to understand the rise of Islamic creationism in Europe, we have to look beyond the narrative of clashing epistemologies of Islam and evolution. Instead, we may get a better insight by looking through the lens of immigration history of Muslims in Western Europe, as well as the subsequent differences of social class and education background of Muslim communities in Europe. Furthermore, in most European newspapers, only a rejection of evolution by Muslims makes for a news item as that feeds into the existing narrative of “problems” of Muslim integration into a secular West. At the same time, and perhaps in tandem, the rejection of evolution has indeed become a marker of social identity for many Muslims in Europe.

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Notes

1. See Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2007).
2. Muslim population statistics from Pew Forum on Religion and Public Sphere (2011).
3. <http://www.harunyahya.com>
4. For example, see a collection of these newspaper articles on Harun Yahya's website under the title, "The powerful influence on the global spread of belief in creation in the world press." Available at: <http://www.harunyahya.com/en/works/19115> (accessed 1 November 2011).
5. Inter-Academy Panel (IAP) statement on the teaching of evolution, <http://www.interacademies.net> (2006).
6. Pakistan Museum of Natural History: <http://www.pmnh.gov.pk>. Evolution is included as part of the *Palaeo Gallery*.
7. From the translation of the Qur'an by MH Shakir. Online text is available from <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/koran/>
8. A section of *The Theos Report* that is based on interviews with "Muslim creationists" and Islamic scholars in the United Kingdom brings up a similar concern that the public discourse over evolution couched in the language of atheism and religion may leave Muslims with no choice but to choose religion (Pharoah et al., 2009: 131).
9. Several recent tweets of Richard Dawkins about Muslims and Islam have also generated considerable media controversy. For example, in one of his tweets he compared the number of Muslim Nobel laureates with those just at Trinity College, Cambridge (Saul, 2013).
10. We should note that a multivariate analysis by Lewis and Kashyap (2013) finds that while British Muslims are more conservative and more religious than other Britons, much of the difference on social and moral attitudes is due to socioeconomic disadvantage and high religiosity among Muslims.
11. See Colbert Report (2005).
12. From the Jihad Watch website: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2011/11/uk-muslim-students-including-trainee-doctors-walking-out-on-lectures-on-evolution> (accessed 15 December 2011).
13. From the website of Harun Yahya, available at <http://www.harunyahya.com/en/Articles/102069/darwinist-panic-in-england-is> (accessed 25 January 2012).
14. The video of the conference is available at <http://www.thedeeninstitute.com/tdi-events/conferences/have-muslims-misunderstood-evolution.html>

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