

Turkey

MARTIN RIEXINGER

For some time Islamic publishing in the West has been associated with pamphlets in awkward English printed on pulp. Strolling through Islamic bookshops in Britain one immediately realizes how things have changed: beautifully edited books are offered for considerable prices. A notable part of these publications is dedicated to the defence of Islam against the challenges of Christianity and materialism. Outstanding examples for this new tendency are the writings of the prolific Turkish author Harun Yahya (pseudonym of Adnan Oktar), whose list of Turkish publications includes about 180 titles, most of them dedicated to the refutation of Darwinism.

The bulk of the publications by Harun Yahya just reiterates – adorned with beautiful illustrations – the basic claims proposed in his most popular work *Evrin teorinin çöküşü* (The Evolution Deceit) with detailed reference to certain phenomena. The religious response to the theory of evolution – as well as modern science in general – has been seriously neglected by Islamic studies. The few research works that deal with the topic concern the acceptance of the concept of evolution by secular-minded intellectuals like İsmail Mazhar,¹ whereas his opposition in Islamist circles has almost passed unnoticed,² although from early on Islamist thinkers like Mawdudi stressed the contradiction between random selection and the design of nature by God; and they denounced the harmful effects of the theory of evolution on society.

Scientific creationism

However, it was not before the 1980s that the refutation of evolutionism became a major issue in the Islamic world. This happened in the most Westernized and secularized country of the Islamic world: Turkey. Under military and later Motherland Party (ANAP) rule evolution was not only condemned in 'religion and ethics' lessons but was even deleted from the biology curriculum. This occurred when a quietist version of Islam was supposed to legitimize military rule and deligitimize 'leftist materialism' by promoting 'spiritual values'. In this period the writings of a new generation of American Protestant fundamentalists were translated into Turkish. Authors like Duane Gish

The Islamic Creationism of Harun Yahya

and John Morris claim that their 'scientific creationism' is not only based on scriptural but also on scientific evidence. Harun Yahya's far from original refutation of the theory of evolution is based on the latter's main assertions:

- Chance cannot explain the formation of proteins let alone the complex composition of cells whereas a conscious creator can.
- The perfect adaptation of all living creatures shows that they are products of 'intelligent design'.
- Evolutionists have not been able to present 'missing links' between species let alone higher taxa. The examples proposed up to now were forgeries.

This connection with Christian 'scientific creationism' notwithstanding, Harun Yahya kept certain subjects, which expose the latter to ridicule in scientific circles, out of his works. Unlike those who promote 'Flood geology' or struggle to find evidence for the existence of pterosaurs in historical times, Harun Yahya never questions that the earth is hundreds of million years old and that a wide range of animals and plants have become extinct. In his popular book *Kavimler'in helâki*, which claims to present archaeological evidence for the reports on the prophets in the Qur'an, he describes the Flood as an event that did not affect the whole globe but only Mesopotamia. Finding archaeological evidence for the prophetic stories in the Qur'an is another popular subject in Islamist circles. This is most probably due to the influence of Mawdudi, whose *Tafhim ul-Qur'an* is referred to by Harun Yahya.³ Other main sources are popular magazines and Werner Keller's *Und die Bibel hat doch recht*.

In view of the deep impact of Protestant creationism it is not surprising that the same flaws characterize the writings of Harun Yahya. He takes arguments of biologists over the details of evolution out of their context and presents them as refutations of evolution as such. He also puts forth unfounded claims like the one that australopithecus had prehensile feet like chimps and not feet like men, enabling them to walk upright.⁴

The dangers of materialism

Although Harun Yahya takes great efforts to endow his writings with a scientific veneer, he frankly states that biology is not his real concern. His commitment to refute the theory of evolution was fostered when he, as a student at the Mimar Sinan Üniversitesi's arts faculty, saw that many of his class fellows succumbed to materialist philosophies and abandoned Islam.⁵ He concluded that Darwinism was 'the underpinning of a dishonest philosophy, ... materialism', and hence the base for all ideologies and political movements threatening Turkey (Yahya 1999b:1). According to him differentiating between the theory of evolution and social Darwinism is futile. Darwin's actual denunciation of slavery notwithstanding, Harun Yahya alleges that his only intention was to legitimize colonialism and slavery. The praise for Darwin by fascists and peripheral anti-Turkish remarks in his private corre-

spondence enable Harun Yahya to hold him responsible for the assassination of Turkish immigrants by German neo-nazis in the 1990s (Yahya 1999a:40ff., 68ff.). The importance Marxists attach to Darwinism as a fellow materialist ideology lets Harun Yahya draw a direct line between Darwin and the separatist Kurdish Workers Party, PKK (Yahya 1999a:76ff.). As alternative to the materialist ideologies he proposes an extremist variant of idealism that denies the existence of the material world altogether. The only thing that exists is the soul in which God creates sense perceptions. This immaterial soul cannot be explained with reference to atoms and molecules. Harun Yahya bolsters his claim not only with reference to famous Sufis but also by invoking Berkeley and Wittgenstein (Yahya 1999b:174ff.). Although Harun Yahya's primary motivation is political and obviously anti-secularist, he refrains from openly challenging Kemalism. He published pamphlets that portray Atatürk as a devout believer who must be defended against the claim of the materialists that he was one of them (Yahya 2002).

Harun Yahya's worldview is conspirative. For the success of Darwinism he holds responsible a mafia that controls scientific institutions and journals as well as popular magazines like *National Geographic* and *The Scientific American*. In the writings considered here he does not, however, suggest a connection between his attacks against Darwinism and his second most important issue, Freemason and Templar conspiracies (Yahya 2000b). Unlike other recent Islamist conspirators he does not vilify Jews in general. He describes Zionism as a result of a complot by the Freemasons. Nevertheless Harun Yahya propagates the theses of Holocaust deniers such as the German neo-Nazi Leuchter, which casts doubt of the seriousness of his attacks on nazism in his anti-evolutionist writings (Yahya n.d.:77ff.).

Institutionalization at home, reputation abroad

Harun Yahya has institutionalized his campaign in the Bilim Araştırma Vakfı (Science Research Endowment), which in 1998 began to hold major conferences in Turkish cities to which leading 'scientific creationists' from America were invited. Secular-minded scientists, who for some time did not take the creationist challenge seriously, reacted with the formation of the Türk Evrim Kurulu (Turkish Evolution Association) that advocates the teaching of evolution in schools and organizes counter-campaigns.⁶ Nevertheless Harun Yahya's theses made inroads into the political mainstream. In 2001 an ANAP deputy demanded censorship of foreign television stations that propagated the theory of evolution.⁷ The Bilim Araştırma Vakfı attracted the suspicion of state authorities in late 1999, but the allegations, including sexual abuse, proved to be invalid. However, Harun Yahya's slander campaign against secular-minded professors of science in 1999 led to a lawsuit that resulted in hefty fines.⁸

Harun Yahya's works have been translated into several languages including Arabic,

Spanish, Russian, Serbo-Croat, Urdu, Malay, and German. In September/October 2001 three lecturing tours abroad were scheduled, to the US, Indonesia, and to the British Isles. The conferences are generally hosted by Muslim student associations. His articles appear on many Islamic homepages kept by organizations or individuals. His international reputation is due to the extensive use of the internet. He may thus be considered the first Islamic intellectual who has based his career on the use of this most up-to-date technology. His writings show that Islamism has a religious aspect that many studies focusing on political strategies neglect. In this respect this ideology is more closely related to its Protestant fundamentalist counterpart than has been generally acknowledged hitherto.

Notes

1. Najm A. Bezirgan, 'The Islamic World', in Thomas F. Glick (ed.), *The Comparative Reception of Darwinism* (Austin, 1974), 375–87; Adel A. Ziadat, *Western Science in the Arab World: The Impact of Darwinism, 1860–1930* (Houndmills, 1986).
2. Among the few authors dealing with this subject are: Pervez, *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality* (London, 1991); Klaus-Peter Ohly, 'Evolution and Islam – Islamisierung der Wissenschaften', in Eve-Marie Engels, et al (eds), *Ethik der Biowissenschaften: Geschichte und Theorie* (Beiträge zur 6. Jahrestagung der DGGTB in Tübingen 1997, Berlin 1998), 353–9; Aykut Kence and Ümit Sayın, 'Islamic Scientific Creationism: A New Challenge in Turkey', *NCSE Reports* (1999) 19:6; Taner Edis, 'Cloning Creationism in Turkey', *NCSE Reports* (1999) 19:6.
3. Sayyid Abu l-A'la Mawdudi, 'Darwin ka nazariya-i irtıqa', in *Tafhimat*, vol. ii, 19th ed., (Lahore, 1998), 277–84.
4. I am grateful to Klaus-Peter Ohly, University of Bielefeld, for giving me access to a list he has compiled for a forthcoming publication.
5. http://www.harunyahya.org/yazar_hakkinda.htm
6. <http://www.geocities.com/evrimkurami/kampanya.html>; also Edis (1999) and Kence and Sayın (1999), see note 2 for full references.
7. *Hürriyet*, 29 April 2001.
8. <http://www.geocities.com/evrimkurami/basin/gerkarar.html>

References

- Yahya, Harun. n.d. Soykırım yalanı. *Istanbul*.
- . 1999a. Darwin'inTürkdüşmanlığı. *Evrin teorinin'ınırkçı yüzü*. *Istanbul*.
- . 1999b. The Evolution Deceit. *The Scientific Collapse of Darwinism*. *London*.
- . 2000a. *Kavimler'inhelâki*. 5thed. *Istanbul*.
- . 2000b. *Yeni Masonik Düzen*. 3rded. *Istanbul*.
- . 2002. *Atatürk'ü iyi anlamak*. *Istanbul*.

Dr Martin RieXinger is currently conducting research on the religious response to modern science in Islam at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. E-mail: martin.riexinger@orient.uni-freiburg.de

