

Anti-Evolutionism Among Muslim Students

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In December 2004, local and national media were stirred by an incident at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. A group of Muslim students in the bio-medical sciences were said to have carried out an essay assignment for the course "Man and Evolution" by uncritically copying anti-evolutionist scripts from supposedly anti-western Muslim sites such as www.harunyahya.com. Generally, teachers said, Muslim students did not even want to consider evolution theory. The discussion spiralled from a local concern over the

scientific attitude of Muslim students to various national debates on Islam and integration and evolution versus Intelligent Design. It led to articles in multiple newspapers, analyzing the scope and nature of the "problem."² In the VU newspaper *Ad Valvas*, a discussion about science versus religion resurfaced. Van der Hoeven, minister of Education, Culture, and Science, started a national debate about the educational and scientific status of the Intelligent Design theory—among other reasons

to enhance religious and cultural integration.³ In spite of this rather abundant media spin-off, the inspiring event seemed locally bound: no other Dutch universities reported to have problems with Islamic anti-evolutionism.⁴

Can the essay incident be situated within a broader development of ideologies like anti-evolutionism, defence of supernatural reality and an anti-scientific worldview among Muslim students? Moreover, how can the relatively intense response of Dutch politics and media to this incident, seemingly displaced from its more familiar American or Christian context, be understood? In the fall and winter of 2004-2005, I conducted qualitative research among Turkish and Moroccan Muslim students of various disciplines in Amsterdam, participating in Islamic student organizations, classroom discussions, and student mosques and conducting over 25 formal interviews. The data

gathered suggest that most of these students partially rejected and partially adopted evolution theory, affirmed various supernatural phenomena, and had a largely positive view on science and its relation to Islam. Further, these religious convictions appeared to coexist with an active citizenship and embracement of democratic values.

Negotiations with evolution theory

Though a few students I interviewed simply negated the whole of evolution theory on the basis of its perceived incongruence with the creation account in the Quran, their vast majority constructed types of *bridge models* in which some aspects of evolution were accepted and others rejected. The construction of these models does not imply that the students experienced the encounter of two different accounts of origin as very problematic or disconcerting. On the contrary, they hardly recognized the implicit presence of evolutionary assumptions underlying studies like medicine, chemistry, and bio-medical sciences. Students in these disciplines were of course aware that they were required to take some courses and exams related to evolution theory, but they considered this quite unproblematic as they felt that external reproduction does not require internal acceptance. Many students even stressed they felt it important to learn about "Darwin's theory" so that they could better understand, and argue with, its adherents.

Supposed anti-evolutionist convictions among Muslim students in Amsterdam have been widely discussed in Dutch media. These discussions are often undergirded by the assumption that religious attitudes have concrete socio-political relevance, more specifically, that anti-evolutionism fosters disintegration and radicalism. However, research data show that most Muslim students creatively combine ideas about evolution and faith, thus prompting questions about the stereotypes that surface in public debates on integration in the Netherlands.¹

In the students' bridge models, microevolution and the concept of "the survival of the fittest" appeared on the accepted side of the equation. Students reasoned that it is impossible to deny the logic and empirical backing of these concepts. They also connected microevolution to theistic evolution, the idea that God has guided the adjustments in his creatures. Several students accepted the Big Bang and believed that the Quran contains references to both the Big Bang and evolution theory. For almost every student I talked with, macroevolution was on the negated side in the bridge models. In contrast to microevolution, macroevolution was connected to atheist aspirations. Arguments against macro-evolution concerned problems with the fossil record, the unlikelihood that the great number of mutations needed to create a new species would simply occur, the impossibility that chance produces and maintains the complexity of nature, the misinterpretation of Darwin's original work, Darwin's personal regrets about his theory, the arbitrary parameters of computer simulations of evolution, the empirical evidence against the linear development of skull size, the unexplained extinction of dinosaurs, and the unknown "what" behind the Big Bang. Likewise, no student accepted the idea that human beings have sprung from apes. Arguments against this recent event in the evolution process involved questioning why apes still exist, pointing to inner and outer human-ape differences, suggesting that human beings used to look more like apes, and advocating the (supposedly Quranic) idea that during the time of the prophets, God, in his wrath, turned some wicked people into apes. More generally, the validity of evolution theory was relativized by emphasizing that it is "just a theory," or "also a belief," or that it is not, or not sufficiently, empirically proven.

Aside from its partial acceptance in the form of microevolution and theistic evolution, evolution theory was also partially embraced by means of some creative reinterpretations. A female Turkish student, for example, postulated the dualistic nature of humanity. She accepted evolution theory as the explanation of biological, but not of spiritual humanity. A Moroccan female student approached evolution theory as a potential divine ordeal. In her view, bones that support evolution theory could possibly exist by God's will to test the faithfulness of his people: is their faith strong enough to believe in spite of the facts? Another Moroccan female student affirmed the validity of evolution by invoking it to explain the significance of the headscarf: the sex-oriented male mind would necessitate protection of itself and others. Lastly, a male Turkish student saw evolution theory as a necessary theoretical interlude science has to pass through before it can reach ultimate truth, i.e. a scientific explanation of the Quranic account of origins. In short, the attitude of these Muslim students towards evolution theory was much more one of negotiation than downright rejection.

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Negotiations with supernatural claims

Roughly speaking, the source of the evolution-creation debate can cross-religiously be located in a tension of two philosophical presuppositions: naturalism and supernaturalism. Concerning evolution theory, the bridge models allowed students to maintain a crucial supernatural element (God as creator) in coexistence with natural explanations of life (e.g. micro-evolution, survival of the fittest, Big Bang). In my research I also investigated other aspects of the students' worldviews that could possibly partake in this tension between naturalism and supernaturalism, assuming that tenets of their Islamic and academic learnings would mutually shape and alter one another.

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In line with the acceptance of creation, it clearly stood out that the existence of God went unquestioned among the students. Atheism was strongly refuted. All students believed in angels, *djinn*s, and devils, to which they applied both supernaturalist and naturalist characteristics. Especially for medicine students, hesitations on the true origins of psychiatric ailments stood out—are they djinn or genes? The view on miracles emerged from a mixture of natural and supernatural ingredients. On the one hand, students made clear distinctions between make-believe and authentic miracles, used scientific explanations for and minimized the supernatural content of the miraculous, and had theological objections against it. On the other hand, students all accepted the miracles in and of the Quran, said to accept miracles without proof, and were theologically “forced” to embrace the potential of the miraculous because of God’s omnipotence. The supernatural origin and conservation of the Quran were unequivocally embraced. Lastly, all students believed in Judgment Day, heaven, and hell. Thus, though some naturalist traits could be traced in students’ religious ontologies, the acceptance of most supernatural claims was evident.

Negotiations with general science

As for the general attitude of Muslim students towards science, I found that on the whole, students were unfamiliar with problematizing the relationship between Islam and science. Their rather “instant” view on science and religion consisted of positions granting religion either a superior or equally valid status to science. The former (superiority of religion) did not so much find expression in a rejection of the whole of Western science, but more so in questioning aspects of its cognitive validity and ethical soundness as compared to Islam. The latter (equality of science and religion) was argued for by emphasizing the similar structure and compatible content of science and religion, predominantly drawing on the Islamic emphasis on gaining knowledge, the leading role of Islamic science in the Middle Ages, and the so-called scientific teachings in the Quran (e.g. its references to various scientific facts and theories such as the stages of embryonic development, the distinction between salt and fresh water, the positions of the sun and moon, the composition of mountains, the source of rain, heliocentrism, the expansion of the universe, Einstein’s relativity theory, the beneficial health effects of breast milk, the digestive system of cows, the roundness of the earth, friction force, the amount of oxygen in the air etc.). Expressions of being anti-science or experiencing significant tensions between Islam and science were wholly absent.

The Dutch response

In view of this larger context of Muslim students’ negotiations with evolution theory, supernaturalism, and science, how can the intense response of Dutch politics and media to the essay incident be understood? Public discussions about evolution and creation, religion and science, and other Islam-related topics, often seem undergirded by the assumption that religious axioms and attitudes have concrete socio-political relevance. More specifically, they seem to converge in the idea that anti-evolutionism is a societal problem, facilitating disintegration and radicalism. Three public figures may be mentioned here to illustrate this type of thinking. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, former member of Parliament for the right-winged VVD in the Netherlands and internationally known for her fight against radical Islam and Muslim gender inequality, often connects religious to socio-political views. For example, in a defence of her film, *Submission*, a provocative depiction of the position of female Muslims, she connects dogmatic renewal, de-absolutization of doctrinal claims, and a historic-symbolic reading of scriptures within Islam to the rise of a faith that embraces humanistic values and gender equality.⁵ A second example is Afshin Ellian, a Dutch-Iranian professor at the faculty of law in Leiden University and famous for his straightforward defence of human rights and sharp rejection of radical Islam. In one of his writings, he calls out to make jokes about Islam and to expose it to rational philosophical dissection, as he believes that such a critical approach would teach Muslims the concept of tolerance.⁶ Comparable linkages can be found in the thinking of Paul Scheffer, a social scientist at the University of Amsterdam and a prominent member of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA). In a public lecture, he connects repression of re-



Still from www.harunyahya.com

ligious doubt to aggression, and suggests that viewing the Quran as God’s (literal) revelation obstructs Muslims’ attempts to integrate in the West, though he also distinguishes between the spiritual and political components of religion.⁷

The idea underlying these pleas is that religious cognition somehow translates itself into socio-political realities: irrationalism is linked to theocracy, philosophical absolutism to political oppression, and supernatural myth to sloppy sociocultural integration. This type of thought echoes modernization theory and constructivist schools in the sociology of knowledge. It is also connected to radical Enlightenment thought in which not just political religion but religion as a whole is strongly criticized. The common conviction in the media messages and these schools of thought is that socio-political change (or liberation) presupposes religious-philosophical change (or liberation). In the context of such thinking, it is hardly surprising that an explicit anti-evolutionist stance of some Muslim students alarms journalists and ministers.

The research data, however, suggest that neither a stark anti-evolutionism nor an anti-scientific attitude is representative of Muslim students. At the same time, students seemed to hang on to the supernatural tenets of their faith and did not accept evolution theory in its complete form. From a Dutch secular perspective as outlined above, this may be considered a social problem. Ironically though, the Muslim students I conversed with were active participants in civil society, and passionately convinced of democracy, religious pluralism, and equal gender rights. That these students combined such enlightened political views with enchanted beliefs in djinn-caused psychiatric ailments, divinely spoken and flawlessly preserved holy scriptures, and the necessity of the breath of Allah to fuel the Big Bang, illustrates that societal (including educational) integration does not require a secularization of the mind.

Notes

1. D. Koning, “Encounter of Islam and Science: Religious Beliefs and Academic Education Among Muslim Students in Amsterdam” (M.A. thesis, Vrije Universiteit, 2005).
2. For example: “Darwin is de profeet niet,” *Volkscrant*, 9 April 2005; “Nieuwe studenten biologie wijzen evolutie af,” *Trouw*, 4 February 2005; “Intelligent Design is geen goed startpunt voor een dialoog met moslims,” *NRC*, 4-5 June 2005; “Moslimstudenten willen niets van evolutie weten,” *Ad Valvas*, 20 December 2004.
3. See: “De evolutietheorie is niet compleet,” *Volkscrant*, 21-22 May 2005; “Minister wil debat over evolutie en schepping,” *Volkscrant*, 21-2 May 2005; “D66: geen bijbels scheppingsverhaal tijdens de biologieles op school,” *Volkscrant*, 27 June 2005.
4. “Nieuwe studenten biologie wijzen evolutie af,” *Trouw*, 4 February 2005.
5. “Ik bevaag de islam, een religie zonder zelfreflectie,” *Volkscrant*, 30 October 2004.
6. “Maak grappen over de islam!” *Volkscrant*, 6 November 2004.
7. “Het onbehagen in de islam,” *Trouw*, 18 September 2004.

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