

EVOLUTION IN THE LIGHT OF THE Qurʾān and Tradition

Seyyed Hossein Nasr in conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal

In this conversation, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal discuss various aspects of Evolution in light of the Qurʾānic teachings and traditional Muslim understanding of the origin of life. Beginning with a reference to certain methods being used by some modern Muslim evolutionists to insert the Hand of God in the evolutionary narrative, the conversation broadens to the historical context of the arrival of evolution in the Muslim world, especially in the Indian Subcontinent. Other topics discussed include Theistic Evolution and the so-called Ādamic exceptionalism. They also discuss reasons for the paucity of scholarly works in the contemporary Islamic discourse and point to a way forward.

Keywords: Evolution; Theistic Evolution; Ādamic exceptionalism; historical context of evolution; Muslim responses to evolution.

MI: It has been sixteen years since we last talked about this topic and a lot has changed since then. We now have a substantial number of Muslims who are advocating acceptance of the evolutionary narrative in various ways, all of which collapse into two broad categories: (i) the acceptance of the mainstream narrative about the origin and evolution of all life on earth from the most recent common ancestor (MRCA) or the so-called last common ancestor (LCA) by inserting the Hand of God in this mechanism; and (ii) acceptance of the same narrative with the exception of humankind, which then has a subset: exceptionalism as opposed to human exceptionalism. Both categories add Allah Most High to the materialistic narrative and thus attempt to “Islamize” it. As a result, we have a new generation of Muslims who are aggressively promoting the acceptance of evolution as a fact.

Today, I would like to discuss some of the higher-level responses to this new challenge. Recalling our 2006 discussion, I remember that we had

highlighted the lack of any substantial scholarly Muslim response to evolution and we are still at the same place. One can list all the works written by Muslims to counter the evolutionary narrative on one page; perhaps this is so because it was never a Muslim issue. But now it has become a Muslim issue.

Nasr: *Bismi'llāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm*. I am very glad that you have brought up this issue, although sixteen years ago, you and I already had a discussion about it. It is obviously a very important issue now. Let me just say something for a few moments regarding the history of this idea. When the idea of evolution first came up in England in the 19th century via Charles Darwin, it spread rapidly to English colonies. In the European continent, especially France, which also had large colonies, the desire to spread it was not so avid. It did not take pride in Darwin and it did not try to spread his teachings in its colonies—Algeria, West Africa and so forth—in the same vociferous and forceful way as the English did. Of course, later on, French intellectuals also became evolutionists. In any case, the British spread this idea in their colonies, especially in the Indian Subcontinent and Egypt. That is when the idea first arose in the Muslim world through its espousal in British colonies, which you know better than me, so, I will not get into details, but as far as the rest of the Muslim world is concerned, for example, Iran, which was still a major intellectual center of the Muslim world, evolution arrived later, in the 20th century and not earlier.

Many Muslims were not—and still are not—aware of the challenges it poses to Islam as a religion, just as it poses challenges to all religions. And the strange fact is that a younger generation of Muslims has now come to the fore, advocating evolutionism without any knowledge of traditional Islam and its intellectual dimension. And they also do not have knowledge of the criticism of this idea by certain European intellectuals and scientists, such as the famous Italian biologist Giuseppe Sermonti who wrote *Dopo Darwin* or *After Darwin*—as I mentioned last time we spoke.¹

Then, besides these scientists there have been Western philosophers who have refuted evolution scientifically and philosophically. I want to draw your attention here to the work of a remarkable philosopher and scientist Wolfgang Smith who lives in California and who is a good

1. "On Biological Origins" in Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology*, Sherwood Park: Al-Qalam Publications, 2007. Also see, *Islam & Science*, Vol. 4 (Winter 2006) No. 2, pp. 181-197.

friend of mine—a brilliant scientist, with a PhD in physics, a devout Catholic, who is open to serious religious discourse and to metaphysics and is also a philosopher. Although he did not know much about Islam, we became good friends and have had many conversations together. I have the greatest respect for him. He has come up with a number of books, especially a book called *Vertical Causality*, in which he shows that every event that takes place in the world of nature does so through not only horizontal but also vertical causality which goes back ultimately to God. He does not base his arguments on a religious text—the Qur’ānic revelation or the Bible—but on purely philosophical and scientific grounds and he proves that since evolution is based on horizontalization of reality, it is a meaningless concept.

We have access to all levels of being, here and now, not in some future as a result of evolution. The chain of causality was horizontalized in the 19th century, because of the death of authentic metaphysics in the West. The Western Church did not have sufficient recourse to its own intellectual tradition to be able to respond to evolution except by faith. And thus, there occurred monkey trials and things like that. In these trials, traditional Western Christians were made to look stupid, and some biologists from—let us say Harvard—were made to look very brilliant, and the story continues more or less in this manner to our day. So, even Christianity in the West was deprived of its own intellectual heritage with which it could have confronted evolutionism seriously. But now, of course, things have changed quite a bit; criticisms of evolutionary theory is now coming from Western scientists, and besides, there are traditional writings, for example those of Martin Lings, who has written books on this topic—profound books from the traditional point of view, Islamic and otherwise.

God does not evolve; the infinite remains infinite and the Absolute remains absolute all the time. Moreover, if one thing becomes another, it is so because God has willed it; it does not do so by itself. That—metaphysically and also theologically—God created and sustains the world is a fundamental premise of the Islamic tradition. And hence, it is absurd to say that anything can happen without His Will or to say that He created a mechanism but then just left it to evolve by itself. It is absurd to say everything has just happened without His Will; that there are no ultimate values, no abiding meanings, no ultimate realities in the world that we live in, you and I. How absurd it is to believe that the greater can evolve from the lesser, that Jesus Christ, Dante, and Rūmī—were all originally in “a bowl of soup” of molecules banging against each other, if one puts it in this way, one realizes, of course, how absurd it is. Where

did such men come from? If time itself generates reality, then where is any room to believe in the Divine? To believe in biological evolution as it is usually understood, is to attribute to matter the character of divinity.

MI: Muslims who are propagating this idea are not saying everything happened on its own; they are inserting the Hand of God into the evolutionary mechanisms. They are not saying that these things are happening randomly. Since that is the only way these people can propagate this idea, so they say, “this is how God has willed it.” But the question is of forms. You have written about forms. Man was always man...

Nasr: Not only forms. You just said something to which I have to respond immediately; you said, they claim: “It is how God has willed it,” that is, He has willed evolution. Now, evolution necessitates that God wills whatever evolution requires, and that He cannot just will anything He wants. That means, they are, in fact, reducing Divine Omnipotence. In their view, Divine Will would now be subjected to the requirements of evolution. That, to say the least, is blasphemous. God is not forced to will according to the workings of evolutionary change and transformation.

MI: I think what the new Muslim evolutionists have done is different from the older versions of acceptance; they are, in fact, using the works of scholars such as al-Ghazālī to “Islamize” evolution, meaning, they have produced a more sophisticated version of the pre-twenty-first century Muslim versions of theistic evolution.

Nasr: They cannot Islamize what cannot be Islamized because, ultimately, we are up against a core content, which requires that everything must of necessity come into existence from a common material substance—the last common ancestor, the so-called LCA, from which all the organisms of the set are descended. Thus, according to this explanation, Jesus Christ and our own Prophet, upon them both be blessings and peace—all evolved out of some common soup of molecules. That means all other prophets also came from that same soup. That would just demolish the Qurʾānic concept of creation and of man as well as of prophecy.

The question to ask is: What do we mean by evolution? For instance, one can say, ‘I evolved as a lover of the French language’, that is, I first did not like it, and then I began to like it. Evolved can be used in that sense legitimately, as it can be in other cases dealing where we are discussing stages of growth or change of a being. You yourself have written a lot about these matters. So, the need really is to clarify further, and ask what one means by evolution. If one means that one life form evolves into another species solely through time and other factors of a material

nature, then, of course, we say no; that is absurd.

MI: No, they do not mean that. They mean that just as God has set a mechanism for the coming into existence of the sun and the moon and the planets and the galaxies, and everything, He is the One who has set a mechanism for the evolution of life on earth; that is their way of accepting evolution.

Nasr: But God has not only created and set the sun and moon in motion, but according to Islam, He also sustains their motion and could change that by His Will. Evolution does not allow that. Moreover, what is the origin of life? From whence came man? The Qur'ān states explicitly that God created Ādam and breathed into him of His Spirit—*wa nafakhtu fīhi min rūḥī*. So such people do not believe in the Qur'ān and anyone who does not believe in the Qur'ān is not a Muslim.

MI: Exactly, but this is the modern version of what you were referring to before about what happened in the Subcontinent, Sayyid Aḥmad Khan and others. Khan actually wrote a partial *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān in which he states that Ādam refers to a metaphoric representation of the human race. Some of them believe in evolution of everything but the human beings and some of them say Ādam was an exception and the rest of humanity came through evolution. Some say there is no theological problem in accepting the evolution of animals.

Nasr: Yes, I know that. I know such claims, but the question for sincere Muslims should be: "How am I going to accept these explanations. The Qur'ān asserts, "In His Hand is the dominion, *malakūt*, of all things." And all of our great traditional scholars, including al-Ghazālī, have reasserted the Qur'ānic view. Were they all wrong? This type of modern Muslim thought is of no positive consequence; it cannot be taken seriously. No one can set aside centuries of Islamic scholarship and come up with something like that. Perhaps one should not even bother to respond to such absurdities. Where we have clear Qur'ānic guidance, nothing can change or supersede it.

One should not go after every small detail; one should rather state the foundational premises clearly and leave it at that. For example, the verses of the Qur'ān explicitly state that God has created all things and He is the One Who has knowledge of all things, indicating that nothing can become anything else without His knowledge and His Will, and yet, the whole evolutionary process is devoid of anything higher than material causes. Hence, it is not possible to simply insert the Hand of God in a process that rejects any transcendent Cause and say, 'Now we can accept it.' There is no logic in such half-way positions; they are arbitrary

insertions, and, in fact, this is doubly problematic because not only the Qurʾān, but no sacred scripture allows it.

Then there is the question of identity and fixedness of things. When God says *By the fig*, He is talking about a fixed identity, a fig is a fig with its identifiable essence. God is not talking about a fruit that is evolving from something else and has no essence of its own. The whole of Qurʾānic language is like that. In fact, none of the sacred scriptures speak about nature as much as the Qurʾān does. No other scripture speaks about nature in such details. When Allah *subhānahu wa taʿāla* says, *the sun and the moon*, He is referring to specific and fixed identities of two planets, there is no reference in the Qurʾān to any evolution of these fixed identities.

MI: Indeed, there are verses referring to the revelation sent to the bee, the hoopoe is working for a prophet, how can a hoopoe do what the Qurʾān tells us if it just evolved over time, or the ants; ants speak in the Qurʾān, when the army of Sulaymān, upon him peace, is coming.

Nasr: Yes, we should not comprise on this matter at all. This is the way of Satan; Satan enters the human being, initially, with a small erroneous suggestion, but we know that small error at the beginning can lead to a big consequence. We need to be careful. And I must say, there are nowadays many young people, brilliant people, who see through this façade. In my own country, Iran, there are many young people who are rooted in their tradition and understand the falsity of evolutionary theory. But unfortunately, we also have the other trend. The ‘*ulamā*’ need to respond to this matter in depth, because there are also many young Muslims who are struggling existentially with these issues.

MI: Yes, I think one of the related issues—and we have talked about this before—is the epistemic value of science. There is this awe of modern science in the modern Muslim mind and even most of our ‘*ulamā*’ do not really understand the philosophy of modern science or the history of science, and hence they are also blind sided.

Nasr: I just wanted to tell you, personally, while I was working on the *Study Quran*, I had to put aside several other projects. *The Study Quran* took ten years of my life, but now I have a book coming out called, *What Is Metaphysics?*, in which I answer many such questions; it has a scathing attack against this error of divinizing modern science. I studied mathematics and physics at MIT, and people cannot just say he does not know anything about modern science while we who have not undergone such a scientific training know better.

MI: Exactly. One of the main problems we have is that our ‘*ulamā*’—most of them, by and large, do not know much about modern science. I do

not know of any great contemporary ‘*‘ālim*’ who has grounding in the enterprise of modern science.

Nasr: This is unfortunate, very unfortunate. But there are some exceptions.

MI: A related area of this issue is the scientific refutation of evolution. Even there we do not have Muslim biologists, chemists, physicists producing any work to refute evolution. Thus, Muslims who write on evolution, in its favor or against it, take work done by others. Especially the work of the scientists connected with the Intelligent Design Movement; I am particularly thinking of the excellent work of Michael Behe, specifically his 1996 book, *Darwin’s Black Box*, wherein he refutes evolution through the idea of irreducible complexity. His point of view is logically coherent. For instance, he proposes: ‘we can infer design by objectively examining a system’ and goes on to provide examples of design. For example, if we come across a group of flowers so arranged as to spell the word “LEHIGH”, we would have no doubt that the pattern was the result of an intelligent design.

In an article published in 2000,² he said that his arguments for intelligent design are open to direct experimental rebuttal. “For instance, his claim in *Darwin’s Black Box* that the bacterial flagellum has an irreducibly complex structure which must have been designed, has a flip side: that is, the flagellum cannot be produced by natural selection acting on random mutation, or any other unintelligent process. To falsify such a claim, a scientist could go into the laboratory, place a bacterial species lacking a flagellum under some selective pressure (for mobility, say), grow it for ten thousand generations, and see if a flagellum—or any equally complex system—was produced. If that happened, my claims would be neatly disproved.”

Then there is the work of William Dembski, the American mathematician, philosopher and theologian, whose 1998 Cambridge University Press book *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance through Small Probabilities* was a major breakthrough in casting aside the spell of evolutionism and for whose 2002 book, *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence*, I had the honor of writing a brief endorsement. He has suffered a lot for his position, academically and professionally.

Nasr: That just shows that evolution in the modern world is not science; it is a pseudo religion.

2. Behe, Michael (July 31, 2000). “Philosophical Objections to Intelligent Design: Response to Critics”, Center for Science and Culture. Seattle, WA: Discovery Institute.

MI: And it has such force that they just bulldoze everyone who comes in front of this force, which has economic, political, social, psychological weapons in its arsenal.

Nasr: But the wall is cracking; pseudo religions cannot stand the test of time. Compared to the nineteenth century, when nearly every European thinker believed in progress and evolution, that is no longer the case. For example, someone wrote a wonderful essay a few years ago called “The Deniable Darwin”, and the essay was read widely. Then there is Giuseppe Sermoniti, who died recently, and a second Italian biologist, Giovanni Monastra, who has just retired. He was a good friend of Sermoniti and a major scientist, who also refuted evolution. So, there are cracks appearing, but in the modern world, evolution is like a central pole, holding up the tent of modernity; if it falls, the whole tent falls. So, modernists try everything to hold it up.

MI: So, in order to demolish this tent, we have to bring in all the resources—the scientific refutation, the Qur’ānic worldview, specific verses, philosophical approach, all of these need to be brought in.

Nasr: Absolutely.

MI: For this, we basically need people who have grounding in all of these areas and that is hard to find.

Nasr: Let me suggest something. You are a scientist and you also have studied deeply the Qur’ān, and you have the correct philosophical approach. So, I suggest that you write a book using all these approaches, the Qur’ānic view, the philosophical approach, the scientific approach, metaphysical approach, bringing all of these approaches to the issue. You can write a book that uses all of these ways to unveil the errors of evolution. Also you could review the literature that exists already in this field, bringing all of these sources together, Muslim and non-Muslim refutations. There is no one work today that covers the whole subject. If you start with a review essay, on the state of scholarship on this issue in your journal, that would be a good start.

MI: Yes, *inshā’ Allāh*. Just like your *Study Quran* project, the *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān* project has consumed a better part of the last decade of my life, but I am now returning to these topics.

Nasr: I pray for you and I also pray that your journal will be successful. If I can help in anyway, I shall do so; please let me know.

MI: Thank you.