



Why I wrote “*Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm*”

“*Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm*” Adlı Kitabı
Yazma Nedenime Dair

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Ethical Statement

It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited (Shoaib Ahmed Malik).

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Dear editor of KADER.

I am writing this letter both to congratulate you on your first issue to be published in English and to give you information about my new book called *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm*. It is the first book written from an Islamic perspective that is published with *Routledge's Science and Religion* series. More specifically, it analyses the discussion of evolution through the lens of Islamic scholastic theology (*kalām*). I know that KADER occupies a very important space in *kalām* in Turkey, and it is why I hope you will find this to be a helpful addition in your first issue in English, which I hope will globally contribute to the studies in Islamic thought in general and the field of *kalām* in particular.

Islam and Evolution

The budding field of Islam and science has been steadily developing over the past few decades.¹ However, out of the many conversations that come under the umbrella of Islam and science, the specific discussion of Islam and evolution remains as one of the most polarising, controversial, and, yet, exciting territories.² This is likely due to the several challenges the theory simultaneously poses for religious believers, with Muslims being no exception. The following are some of them:

1. *Evolution challenges scriptural details* – religious scripture contain several details that intersect and potentially conflict with the theory of evolution. These include the age of the earth, Noah's flood, and, most importantly, the creation narrative of Adam and Eve. Depending on one's hermeneutic framework, some or all of these accounts can be difficult to reconcile with the theory of evolution.
2. *Chance undermines providence* – inherent in evolution, or at least the Neo-Darwinian rendition, is an indeterministic process. Some believe that it is unbecoming or impossible for God to create life through an indeterministic process, as it undermines His providence.
3. *Chance undermines teleology* – religion has it that God has intent and purposes. However, if evolution is true, all life seems to be radically contingent. Did God truly intend to create human beings or are we a lucky accident?
4. *Evolution challenges design* – one perspective is that evolution competes with or undermines design seen in biological organisms. In resonance with William Paley, some see God as an artisan who is responsible for crafting each biological entity according to a wise blueprint or a plan. Evolution, however, provides a scientific explanation for the origins of species and thus apparently undermines the thesis that biological entities are (directly) designed by God.

¹ Guessoum, Nidhal. 2011. *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*. London: I.B. Tauris.

² Guessoum, Nidhal. 2016. "Islamic Theological Views on Darwinian Evolution." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Accessed 1st of January 2020.
<https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-36>;
 Malik, Shoaib Ahmed. 2021. *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm*. London: Routledge.

5. *Evolution amplifies the problem of evil* – estimates indicate that 99% of all species that ever lived are now extinct. Why would an omnibenevolent God create life through a process in which extinction, animal suffering, and cruelty are built into it?

An increasing number of publications have tried to engage the particular topic of Islam and evolution in the past decade, with varying positions and foci.³ (Jalajel 2009; Guessoum 2016; Dajani 2012; Elshakry 2013; Qadhi and Khan 2018; Malik 2021). Some are descriptive, e.g. Elshakry (2013), while others are normative, e.g. Jalajel (2009).

Summary of my Book

One of most recent publications has been my own work, *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* (Malik 2021). In this monograph, I look at evolution through the lens of a specific Sunnī theological known as Ash‘arism as articulated by al-Ghazālī. I engage with metaphysical and hermeneutic issues to then conclude that there are several options available, and that evolution needn’t be a point of contention.

My reasons for writing this book are as follows:

1. There are many misconceptions surrounding evolution. I wanted to use this opportunity to clear the air and help people understand evolution and its entailing problems as easily as possible. For example, some people believe that the chance-like operations embedded in the theory of evolution undermines God’s providence. However, in my work, I identify four different interpretations of chance and conclude that only one of them is problematic. In other words, I introduce nuances that I feel can help alleviate certain misapprehensions about evolution.
2. It is very unfortunate that evolution has become polemical ammunition in the apologetic landscape. New atheists in particular have made it an agenda to present evolution as an inherently atheistic theory. This, in turn, has resulted in evolution becoming a target for many Muslims, as they see it colliding with their faith. It is then no surprise to read and see that Muslims have left Islam because of evolution. I want to discharge this excessive polarisation by showing how much of evolution is actually unproblematic for a Muslim.
3. As a broad generalisation, one of the things I have noticed in academia is how historical and textual Islamic theology has become. It is simply studied as a passive reality. Constructive works are hardly seen or encouraged. In my opinion, Islamic theology is not *just* an artefact of Islamic history. On the contrary, it can be used and instrumentalised to address questions coming out of the natural sciences and philosophy today. It is precisely for this reason that

³ Dajani, Rana. 2012. “Evolution and Islam’s Quantum Question.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 47 (2): 343–53; Elshakry, Marwa. 2013. *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Jalajel, David Solomon. 2009. *Islam and Biological Evolution: Exploring Classical Sources and Methodologies*. Western Cape, South Africa: University of the Western Cape; Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2006. “On the Question of Biological Origins.” *Islam and Science* 4 (2): 181–97; Qadhi, Yasir, and Nazir Khan. 2018. “Human Origins: Theological Conclusions and Empirical Limitations.” *Yaqeen Institute*. Accessed 19th of August 2020. Available at: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/human-origins-theological-conclusions-and-empirical-limitations/>.

I resorted to the works and ideas of al-Ghazālī, who is a revered figure in the Muslim world. To be sure, this does not mean that his theological ideas that were developed 1,000 years ago should be applied exactly as they are. It is my belief that in engaging with and being committed to any intellectual tradition, one must be prepared to be critical of that intellectual lineage while at the same time be courageous enough to bring new life into it. It is why readers will see how Ashʿarism is integrated with several ideas developed in contemporary discourses in my monograph. I don't intend my work to be the final matter on the discussion, but I hope it's a start to more constructive discussions on what Islamic theology could look like in the 21st century.

Having qualified my reasons for writing the book, the following is a brief outline. The book is divided into four parts.

Part 1 – Setting the Context (two chapters)

Chapter one intends to capture the scientific perspective on evolution. It includes a review of the scientific principles of evolution, the evidence that supports it followed by a brief historical overview. It also covers some objections which are thrown at evolution which unnecessarily clutter the discussion. *Chapter two* will look at the Christian responses to evolution. This will cover the positions of young earth creationism, old earth creationism, intelligent design, and theistic evolution. This chapter aims to illustrate the differences between these popular positions; some of the justifications for these positions will resonate with the Islamic tradition while others will not have any parallels. It is against this background that Muslim perspectives on evolution are discussed in Part 2 of this book.

Part 2 – Islamic Perspectives on Evolution (three chapters)

Chapter three will trace and cover all the Qurʾānic verses (that are scattered all across the Qurʾān) and ḥadīths relevant to the Islamic narrative of genesis with minimal commentary (as that will be left for later chapters) to get an overview. This chapter provides the scriptural context for Chapter 4 and the hermeneutic discussion in Part 4 of this book. *Chapter four* is a review of the various positions of how and why Muslims either accept, reject, or remain accommodative in their stances on Islam and evolution. It highlights how thinkers in the same camp may reach similar conclusions, but their justification for their stances may differ. These thinkers looked at in this section are taken up as interlocutors for later chapters. A classification is devised that summarises the different positions:

1. Creationism – everything is instantaneously created by God (complete rejection of evolution⁴);
2. Human exceptionalism – everything is created through the processes of evolution save humans;

⁴ For now, I am using evolution as a placeholder. As will become clear in Chapter 4, what I actually mean by this is common ancestry

3. Adamic exceptionalism – everything is created through the processes of evolution save Adam (and Eve⁵);
4. No exceptions – everything is created through the process of evolution.

Chapter five reviews how various contemporary authors suggest or read evolution onto historical texts written by medieval Muslim thinkers. It is demonstrated how this reading is incorrect because it relies on truncating selective paragraphs that are divorced from their thematic and historical contexts. It is argued how their works were framed in the perspective of the great chain of being rather than evolution.

Part 3 – Metaphysical Considerations (three chapters)

Chapter six introduces the metaphysical framework of the Ash‘arite perspective as outlined by al-Ghazālī. The Ash‘arite framework is then compared to a recent development in science and religion known as the Divine Action Project (DAP). This is to highlight the differences between Ash‘arism and the DAP framework in the contemporary context. Following this, we will look at the problem of naturalism, the problem of chance, and the inefficiency (wasteful process) of evolution within the context of evolution. It is demonstrated that none of these ideas is problematic within the Ash‘arite paradigm. Furthermore, it is concluded that al-Ghazālī’s framework is *metaphysically compatible* with creationism, human exceptionalism, Adamic exceptionalism, and no exceptions. *Chapter seven* evaluates the design argument as portrayed by the intelligent design (ID) camp in relation to evolution. Using the metaphysical framework of Ash‘arism, it is demonstrated that regardless of whether biological organisms – or even the whole universe as a matter of fact – shows overt design, it is a secondary contention. What matters in the Ash‘arite paradigm is contingency, which can cater for any kind of existence, be it designed, complex, simple, or chaotic. Accordingly, committing oneself to ID as an alternative to evolution because it seems more “God-friendly” holds no weight in the Ash‘arite paradigm. *Chapter eight* visits the question of morality in light of evolution. This chapter shows how al-Ghazālī believes morality isn’t innate, i.e. humans don’t occupy any fixed moral codes in their innate nature and is instead social inculcations absorbed through habit. Furthermore, al-Ghazālī adopts divine command theory, which is the idea that it is solely God’s command that determines what is morally good and bad. Given the problems associated with morality in light of evolution, I demonstrate that al-Ghazālī’s ideas on morality are compatible with evolution.

Part 4 – Hermeneutic Considerations (two chapters)

Chapter nine will introduce al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutic framework. This will include his understanding of the balance between reason and revelation, the relationship between science and scripture, how to distinguish literal readings from figurative ones, and a discussion on ḥadīths. It will be made apparent that al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutic framework is tightly welded to his metaphysical framework within which miracles are possible. This will set the stage for when we review the Muslim perspectives that were encountered in Chapter 4. *Chapter ten* evaluates the attempts that have been made to argue for and against evolution using scripture through al-

⁵ For the sake of convenience, I have subsumed Eve under Adamic exceptionalism.

Ghazālī's hermeneutic framework. It is concluded that al-Ghazālī's hermeneutic framework is *hermeneutically compatible* with creationism, human exceptionalism, and Adamic exceptionalism but not with no exceptions. The scriptural reading of Adam being created miraculously would be somewhat difficult to overcome, and al-Ghazālī would have no problem accepting that Adam was created miraculously in his metaphysical and hermeneutic framework.

Final Words

My book is the result of a journey that attempted to explore the challenging and sensitive territory of Islam and evolution. Looking back at the start now, I do not hesitate to admit that I was initially quite naïve about certain elements in this discourse (isn't anyone in the beginning?). I myself have learnt so much since embarking on this path. On my way, I have met, listened to, and exchanged ideas with several individuals from various specialisations (theology, philosophy, and science) and backgrounds (university settings and seminaries) who have helped me understand the numerous dimensions of this critical conversation. I have also tried my utmost best to listen to the worries and concerns of the Muslim laity who find evolution difficult to understand and/or to be incompatible with Islam. The collective culmination of these experiences has led me to change my opinion since the start of this project. I was initially in the no exceptions camp but have since changed my stance to believing that Adamic exceptionalism is the best alignment one can maintain in light of the respective methodologies of science and al-Ghazālī's Ash'arite framework. Subsequently, this book has evolved as much as I have.

When writing this book, the primary readership I had in mind was the Muslim community given the topic's sensitivity in that context. However, it is, in fact, open to multiple audiences. While working through the manuscript and several revisions that came after, I have tried my best to ensure that the reader with no background in either science and/or (Islamic) theology can pick it up and read it. Thus, it will help anyone interested in Islam and evolution, Islam and science, Islamic theology, and al-Ghazālī.

Finally, in my concluding chapter, I emphasize that there remain many un(der)explored approaches, perspectives, and ideas that require further research. These include:

1. Critiquing the methodology, application, or the conclusions of the book.
2. Analysing important scriptural details that could be missing from my material.
3. Going further with the ideas developed in this book, e.g. Intelligent design or Islamic evolutionary theodicies.
4. Looking at evolution through other perspectives, e.g. Maturīdite or non-Sunnī viewpoints.
5. Examining Islam and evolution through other domains, e.g. sociological studies.

All of these suggestions are fruitful lines of inquiries that can help our understanding of the growing conversation of Islam and evolution in particular, and Islam and science more broadly. I can only hope the reader finds my work helpful even if the adoption of al-Ghazālī's framework and the resulting conclusions are not agreeable. If I have been able to help systematise the

discourse and clarify any misconceptions, I consider this to be a major milestone in the ongoing conversation of Islam and evolution.

Given that the monograph is **open access**, your subscribers and readers can download and read the book for free [here](#).