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# Evolution is the disguised friend of Islam

Religious restrictions on the scientific teaching of evolution have no place in a balanced society, writes Mohammed Alassiri.

Nobel laureate James Allison refused to take biology in high school because his teacher would not teach evolution. To him, biology without Darwin was like physics without Newton. This is no exaggeration: the theory of evolution is a unifying and basic scientific concept that hones students' critical thinking skills and helps them to answer questions about the origin and nature of biological systems. Excluding evolution from curricula deprives young students of a powerful framework to support their understanding of biology.

Teaching evolution is widely accepted in most Western countries, in spite of occasional opposition. Sadly, this is not the case in most Muslim countries, where it is banned from many schools and colleges because it is thought to contradict Islamic teachings. Saudi Arabia, Oman, Algeria and Morocco have banned the teaching of evolution completely. In Lebanon, evolution was removed from the curriculum because of religious pressure. In Jordan, evolution is taught within a religious framework. In Egypt and Tunisia, evolution is presented as an unproven hypothesis.

Many factors shape anti-evolutionary views, including sociocultural and religious factors, as well as knowledge levels and ethical perceptions of evolution.

In a Muslim country, the acceptance or rejection of new ideas is often heavily related to religious views of these ideas. Religious views are usually disseminated through the release of a fatwa (religious statement) from the supreme religious institution in the country. The fatwa will discuss a new idea and provide a verdict that either condemns or condones that idea. Fatwas are numbered and listed on country-specific sites that are affiliated with religious institutions in that country, such as [Islamweb.net](http://Islamweb.net) in Qatar.

Let us take a practical example of current fatwas and hostility toward evolution in Islamic countries. Religious institutions in Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Turkey have issued fatwas against the theory

of evolution. The rationale for these fatwas is religious and not based on scientific literature or discussion. For example, in Qatar, fatwa 361168 accuses anyone believing in Darwin's theory of evolution of *kufur* (blasphemy). In Oman, the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate is known for his strong opposition to the theory of evolution, and in 2018 he publicly restated this view. In Saudi Arabia, fatwa 2872 states that the theory of evolution contradicts the creation story in the Quran and the consensus of Muslim scholars.

In Turkey, ostensibly a secular country, evolution is due to be dropped from the national curriculum. Finally, the former president of the International Union for Muslims, Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, has stated that only when the theory of evolution is 100% proven should we conduct *ta'wil*, which means the esoteric interpretation of the Quran.

All of these fatwas and statements against the theory of evolution discourage schools and even colleges from teaching evolution, because of the fear of provoking the majority of society.

It is noteworthy that most theologians in Muslim institutions do not have degrees in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) but in branches of Islamic studies. The rationale for this is that warding off evil should take precedence over bringing benefits, a controversial idea in Islam that can be a double-edged sword: it can serve to hold the fate of science and technology hostage to the interpretations of religious institutions. In other words, it dictates thoughts and opinions and asks that these shape the way evidence is viewed.

During the golden age of Islamic civilization, Muslim scholars proposed a preliminary view of the evolutionary process, called the 'Mohammedan theory of evolution of man from lower forms'. Islam is a religion that supports and urges its followers to seek knowledge and search for the origin of life. The holy Quran asks

followers to "travel through the land and observe how he began creation" (Chapter 29 *Sūrat l-'ankabūt* verse 20–29). So, Muslims are required to pursue a journey of understanding, a journey that cannot be begun by ignoring scientific evidence.

The theory of evolution is under siege by fatwas. To end this siege I propose that we first consider the theory a purely scientific one, alongside the theory of relativity and its explanation of gravity, both of which are taught freely in Islamic countries. Scientific theories should be evaluated through discussion among scientists, not by decree of theologians.

Secondly, we should question the deliberate effort by few theologians to create and spread misconceptions about the theory of evolution. Many Muslim theologians believe that the purposes of religion and science are different; therefore, there is no need for a religious filter for new ideas. Religion is the source of theological, moral and spiritual values, whereas science is the source of innovation, discovery and improved quality of life.

This separation of religion and science has been called for by scholars and scientists alike. Sheikh Muhammad Metwali Al-Sha'raawi has stated, "I search the Quran only for my Islamic duties, not scientific facts." The strict Salafi theologian Sheikh Muhammad Nasiruddin Al-Albaani agrees that the Quran is not a book of science. Finally, Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman proposed that "religion is a culture of faith and science is a culture of doubt." Clearly, a balanced world needs both. □

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