

11-1-2012

Damian Howard. Being Human in Islam: The impact of the evolutionary worldview. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.

Martin Riexinger Ph.D.
Aarhus University, mri@teo.au.dk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Riexinger, Martin Ph.D. (2012) "Damian Howard. Being Human in Islam: The impact of the evolutionary worldview. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 14.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1126

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol4/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Damian Howard. *Being Human in Islam: The impact of the evolutionary worldview*. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.

Howard starts with the observation that much of the recent debate involving religion and the theory of evolution has been marked by a shrill tone, set by neo-Darwinist atheists like Richard Dawkins, to whom the pseudo-scientific claims of both evangelical and Islamic creationists lend credibility. According to the author, such polemics blur the underlying fact that the theory of evolution poses a challenge to conventional religious worldviews, a challenge to which religious thinkers of different traditions have a variety of responses. Howard's intention to analyze Islamic theological anthropology, specifically, does also reflect his own intellectual and religious background, since the Catholic Church and the Jesuit Order, to which Howard belongs, had its own problems coming to terms with the theory of evolution. Howard's religious background is reflected in his heightened awareness of the problem; although most of his analysis is strictly scholarly he comes forth with his own suggestions regarding how an innovative Islamic response to the theory of evolution might look like in the final chapter. However, these suggestions which reflect Christian experiences with the challenge of the theory of evolution are clearly marked as his standpoint and not forced upon the reader.

In the introductory chapter, Howard argues that the ways in which new concepts are received in a given society are determined by the notions that are already present in that society. He asserts that the central problem any society faces in accepting the theory of evolution has to do with the challenge that evolutionary theory poses to that society's Anthropological Imaginary (AI)—their understanding of human nature, or the *humanum*, as he calls it. He sketches the way in which the theory of evolution, which he sees as a product of the pantheist philosophy of romanticism, has led to a variety of philosophical and theological responses in the West. He pays special attention to case of the Roman Catholic Church, for which the theory of evolution appeared to undermine both the idea of the original sin and the concept of man as the purpose of creation, the premise on which the dignity of the *humanum* rests. According to Howard, the reformulation of evolution as a secondary means by which God actualizes His will, a theory proposed by Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner, paved the way for the acceptance of the theory of evolution within the Catholic Church. Next, Howard describes Islamic conceptions of the *humanun*, which emphasize man's vicegerency—i.e. man's representation of Allah on Earth—and less so the body-soul dualism known to Christianity). Islam also asserts that man's ability to acquire knowledge distinguishes humans from all other living creatures. As such, the theory of evolution appears to undermine Islam's conceptions of man as a unique species. Howard concludes with an outline of positive and negative responses to the theory of evolution by both Muslims and Arab Christians in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The second chapter is dedicated to the influence of Henri Bergson on Islamic thought and on Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938, British India), Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi (1922-1993, Morocco), and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (b. 1955, Senegal), with cursory remarks on a number of other authors. According to Howard, Bergson's importance in the Islamic discussion of evolution is based on Bergson's disassociation of the idea of progress from "scienticist reductionism," the reduction of complex interactions to the sum of their parts. Although Bergson's theory of "creative evolution" (*evolution créatrice*) was intended to oppose to the "randomness" of Darwinian theory and in spite of the condemnation of Bergson's ideas by the Catholic Church, it was Bergson who inspired those who contributed to the reconciliation of the Church with the

theory of evolution. However, in this chapter, interesting as it is in itself, the question of biological evolution gets lost. According to Howard, Bergson was attractive to a “certain elite class of Muslims” because “man could no longer be analyzed as substance and so became thinkable as a unique kind of action within the movements of the cosmos” (p. 85). Furthermore, Bergson’s differentiation between “closed” and “open” forms of religiosity inspired those who longed for a dynamic reinterpretation of Islam. However, except for the case of Iqbal, this desire, says Howard, was a desire mainly of people whose intellectual formation was based on Western foundations.

The next chapter examines the ideas of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933, Iran then USA), who was to become one of the most vocal opponents of the theory of evolution in the Islamic world. Hossein drew his inspiration from the “perennial philosophy” of the “traditionalist school” of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, whose consciously anti-modernist school of thought dismisses most of Western thought after Enlightenment with the argument that all intellectual endeavors have been disassociated from the “search for transcendent truth.” Hence, the “perverted” natural sciences have to be overcome by a “sacred science,” which accepts the cosmos as holistic and meaningful. Howard demonstrates that the traditionalist approach itself is anthropocentric and that the use of Islamic and other (Catholic, Asian) religious traditions is basically instrumental, (or as he calls it, strategic). The theory of evolution is hence *a priori rejected* because of the role randomness plays in the theory of genetic mutation, for example, and because the theory of evolution deprives man of his privileged position in the cosmos.

To reestablish science as something meaningful is the intention of the Malaysian author Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (b. 1931), one of the thinkers with whom Howard deals as an exponent of the movement for the “Islamization of science.” Al-Attas insists on the primacy of traditional scholarly disciplines such as *tafsīr* the pursuit of which remain the duty of the all religious individuals (*fard al-ayn*)—as opposed to the pursuit of secular, pragmatic knowledge, which remains a pursuit incumbent upon only a specialized minority (*fard al-kifāya*). Al-Attas’ anthropology is based on the idea that man is unique because of his rational abilities and on the concept that the animal soul impedes the rational soul. His rejection of the theory of evolution does hence reflect his understanding that evolution is perceived to question this uniqueness of man.

Whereas the frame of reference for al-Attas is the moderate Sufism of al-Ghazali, Ismail al-Faruqi and those associated with his International Institute for Islamic (IIIT) thought have a Salafi background. Unlike Nasr and al-Attas, the Salafis are less prone to question empirical facts. Instead, they focus on giving Islamic explanations and on refuting what they see as inherently non-Islamic assumptions in scientific theories. Nevertheless, they agree with Nasr and al-Attas with regard to a holistic and teleological worldview (one in which purpose and design appear to exist in nature). A main difference between the Sufi and Salafi understandings, however, is that the Salafis’ show a stronger interest in human sciences and anthropology in particular than in biology and cosmology. For example, Ma’ruf, a Sri Lankan Muslim associate of the IIIT does accept human evolution as a biological fact. He even argues that it competes with the Islamic understanding of creation as a continuous process. His criticism, however, takes as starting point the standard evolutionist explanation for the emergence of civilization. Whereas Western evolutionism regards the development of technology as the decisive step in the development of civilization, for a Muslim, the most influential catalyst was the acquisition of knowledge about the creator. The role of struggle as source of progress is another aspect of the theory of evolution which the advocates of the

“Islamization of science” denounce because that allegedly contradicts the religious imperative to foster cooperation. Howard describes Salafis’ position as “refreshing” but he points to the fact that Ma‘ruf, for example, evades the problem of randomness inherent to Darwin’s evolution. According to Howard, this gap is part of the larger dilemma of the IIIT’s approach. He claims, although it may well “[...] salve the consciences of Muslims working in the established sciences and [...] ensure them that their Islamic identity is dependent more on their moral intent than on the content of their research,” it fails to address the hermeneutical issues related to the Anthropological imaginary (p. 145).

The last author Howard deals with is the Welsh convert Wyn Davies (b. 1942), who belongs to Ziauddin Sardar’s *Ijmali* group. Her stance on the theory of evolution is also primarily based on anthropological and not on biological concerns. She argues that culture is a common phenomenon among all humans and groups of humans, not something which divides mankind into more and less “advanced” groups. As Howard shows, however, critics like Richard Tapper have already pointed out that Davies creates a bogeyman by misrepresenting a materialist minority position as the standard concept in anthropology. Whereas Davies accepts biological evolution, she insists on a teleological interpretation of evolution as a part of her efforts to integrate all sciences into a holistic framework.

With his study, Howard provides an interesting and thorough overview of the responses of an elite spectrum of Muslims on the challenges of an evolutionary worldview. One could argue that his selection of authors who write in Western languages is far from representative. However, he points out correctly that it is far from improbable that some of their arguments indeed trickle down, given that such arguments are widely discussed among Muslim intellectuals. Howard shows that no matter whether or not the chapter authors accept evolution as a biological fact, they remain strictly committed to a teleological perspective, wherein the existence of a “designer” of the universe is assumed, typically presented as God, and are skeptical of independent causality fundamental to Darwin’s theory. At his point Howard addresses the question whether Islamic theology might profit from considering Christian responses to the theory of evolution other than anti-evolutionist fundamentalism. In this context he states that the positions of Polkinghorne, Bowke, and Rahner deserve particular attention because their ‘consonance approach’ because (quoting Polkinghorne) the “[...] the ‘world of becoming that evolutionary theory implies has a theological corollary in a ‘conception of cosmic history as an unfolding creative improvisation rather than the performance of a divinely pre-ordained score’ suggesting that the future is unknown to God” (p. 165). Furthermore they do not try to demonstrate that there is an ‘objectively spiritual dimension to reality’, instead they restrict to themselves to showing that it plausible (p. 165). On this basis they are able to accept that the human spirit has emerged rather than been implanted. According to Howard this is also the point where a new Islamic theological approach to the theory of evolution can be imagined. Centered on a more holistic understanding of science than is common in the West and taking into account that Islamic thought tends to base the uniqueness of man on “those aptitudes – language, culture, etc. – which draw people together and to God’ such an approach might rather emphasize ‘man-in-the-world’ and ‘man-in-society’ rather than man as an individual (p. 171).