

The Future of Acceptance of Evolution in the Muslim World

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Key Points from the Talk

If there is one take-away message, it is that there is *no single position* on evolution in the Muslim world.

At the same time, this is a unique moment. Mass-education, transnational migration, and access to the internet has produced a large population of globally connected youths. It is in this context that the issue of evolution is coming into play.

Survey:

We have recently initiated a survey (oral interviews) to look at how educated Muslims look at biological evolution and how do they negotiate various issues of science & religion. For this purpose, we are interviewing Muslim medical doctors and medical students in 8 countries (Malaysia, Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, and Indonesia; and 3 Diasporas: Turkish doctors in Germany, Pakistani doctors in UK, and Pakistani, Arab, and Turkish doctors in the US). This study is supported by a 3-year grant from NSF (#0925982). We are in the middle of our survey, and here I present preliminary results from Pakistani doctors in the US and Malaysian physicians and medical students. *The work presented here is in collaboration with a graduate student at Univ. of Chicago, Donald Everhart.*

Key Findings:

- 1) Wide range of views. A vast majority of Pakistani doctors in the US accepted evolution, but the opposite was true for the Malaysian sample.
- 2) However, in most cases, we see a *deep level of negotiation* – especially with regard to the relation of evolution to Islam. Many had never really thought about the question before. Some responded with complex answers like, “I accept evolution scientifically, but reject it religiously”. But we also got many responses (and this was especially the case in the Malaysian sample) that “Darwin’s theory” is against Islam – even though some would later be okay with microbial and animal evolution.
- 3) Islam plays a dominant role in forming the worldview of these Muslim doctors. Nevertheless, there were many Muslims in our sample (a vast majority of Pakistani-US doctors) who did not find Islam to be an impediment to the acceptance of evolution.
- 4) All Pakistani doctors who accepted evolution also found relevance of evolution to medicine.
- 5) Young Earth Creationism was completely absent in the Muslim sample.

An outlook for the future:

The acceptance or rejection of evolution will most likely be shaped by local social, political and cultural factors in the different parts of the Muslim world. Some places will not have higher levels of acceptance – but perhaps even different ways of negotiating evolution and Islam (e.g. Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan). We are already seeing this diversity in the inclusion or exclusion of evolution in biology textbooks. However, the lack of Young Earth Creationism and a positive attitude towards practical applications, gives me hope that basic principles of evolution will be accepted relatively broadly in the Muslim world. Religion will still play an important role in the worldview of educated Muslims. If evolution gets conflated with atheism, then a vast rejection, even of the basic principles, is quite possible. Human evolution, though, will likely continue to be a controversial subject – and perhaps be rejected by the majority of Muslims.

But who will shape the future acceptance/rejection of evolution?

Probably the educated and globally connected middle-class young professionals...that today we are seeing on the streets of Cairo and Tunisia.