



Tawaqquf and Acceptance of Human Evolution

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Abstract

Traditionally-minded Muslims have been resistant to the idea of human evolution, justifying their stance by the account of Adam and Eve being created without parents as traditionally understood from the apparent (*zāhir*) meaning of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. The account of the creation of these two specific individuals belongs to a category of questions that Sunni theologians refer to as the *sam'īyyāt*, “revealed knowledge.” These are matters for which all knowledge comes exclusively from Islam's sacred texts. The orthodox approach to this category of questions—held by Ash'arī, Māturīdī and Salafī theologians alike—is to assert only what the texts indicate and to refrain from asserting anything further, taking a stance of theological non-commitment (*tawaqquf*) about any details not expressly elaborated by the texts. This paper first determines that the classical, orthodox stance on Adam and Eve is that they were created without parents and that all humans on Earth today are their descendants. It then explores the potential of the methodological stance of *tawaqquf* for traditionally-minded Muslims who hold this view to at the same time accept, or at least be tolerant of, the scientific account of human evolution. The conclusion is that Muslims are not obligated to deny the idea of human evolution in order to remain faithful.

Introduction

This paper explores the extent to which resistance to evolution among contemporary Muslims is driven by a commitment to theological considerations and religious orthodoxy. It does so by going back to the methodological foundations of classical Sunni theology to determine what position such an approach to the question might be expected to yield. One of the most contentious issues concerns human evolution, in particular, as it is seen by many Muslims to contradict the Islamic account of Adam's creation without parents (as traditionally understood from the apparent (*zāhir*) meaning of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*). To what extent would classical theology concur with this viewpoint if its methodological

principles were applied to the question? In other words, does the idea that Adam and Eve were created without parents mean that Muslims who hold this belief must reject the idea of human evolution as well?

The scope of this study encompasses the scholarly traditions recognized, at least by their respective adherents, to be part of Muslim orthodoxy—referred to in Islamic discourse as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘a* or more colloquially as “Sunni.” It covers the works of the scholars of the Ash‘arī¹, Māturīdī², and Salafī³ theological schools as well as the sources they all draw upon—the Qur’an, the *Sunnah*, and the opinions of the earliest generations of Muslims (*Salaf*). The reason for this choice is that these traditions represent, for most of the world’s Muslims, the “mainstream” of Islamic thinking, and therefore have greater relevance for determining what a general Islamic perspective on human evolution could be. This does not preclude other interpretive methods yielding other viable conclusions. It is just that those conclusions would not be in accordance with the methods used by practitioners of the three Sunni theological schools.

This paper is not concerned with the strength of the scientific evidence and arguments presented by evolutionary biologists. When it refers to evidence as

¹ Sunni theological school attributed to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 322 AH/ 936 CE). This theological school has generally been embraced by scholars of the Shāfi‘ī and Mālikī legal schools and is regarded as a traditionalist reaction to the rationalism of the earlier Mu‘tazilī theological school. [Refer to Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), x and Oliver Leaman. “The developed *kalām* tradition”; in Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 85.]

² Sunni theological school attributed to Abū al-Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333 AH/944 CE). Scholars of the Ḥanafī legal school have generally embraced this theological school, and its adherents claim to follow the theological teachings of Abū Ḥanīfah. [Refer to Oliver Leaman. “The developed *kalām* tradition”; in Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 86-89.]

³ A broad term used to describe Sunni religious thought that decries the scholastic theology of the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī theological schools. This thought has generally been associated with the Ḥanbalī legal school, most importantly with al-Barbahārī (d. 330 AH/941 CE), a contemporary and critic of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī. However, a number of scholars from the other three canonical legal schools identify with it. The term *Atharī* is often used to refer to early scholars of this tendency, the word *athar* referring to textual traditions, as opposed to a reliance on scholasticism and reason. Its most famous proponents are two later Ḥanbalī theologians: Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH/1326 CE) and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751 AH/1350 CE). Refer to Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), x, 23 and 76, and Oliver Leaman. “The developed *kalām* tradition”; in Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 85.

being empirical, it is describing the nature of that evidence and not its strength. The paper merely explores the compatibility of the idea of human evolution with Islamic beliefs. It does not advocate for any scientific theory or interpretation of scientific evidence. The description of a particular idea or belief in this paper, whether scientific or religious, does not constitute advocacy for that idea or belief.

Classical works of Islamic theology divide theological topics into three categories, matters pertaining to belief in God (*ilāhiyyāt*), matters pertaining to belief in the prophets (*nubuwwāt*), and belief in matters that can only be known through revelation (*sam‘iyyāt*). This third category deals with everything that Muslims are supposed to believe only because they are mentioned in the Qur’an and *Sunnah*, like the existence of angels, *Jinn*, Heaven and Hell, the events of the Day of Judgment, as well as stories of the past that cannot be verified by history or other empirical evidence. These matters are also referred to as the “Unseen,” because they cannot be determined by empirical knowledge nor by reason.⁴ Therefore, what has not been mentioned about their details or characteristics is considered outside of human knowledge as people have no effective means to speculate about them. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī sums this up nicely in *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*:

*The Unseen is divided into what is indicated by evidence and what is not indicated by evidence. As for what is not indicated by evidence, Allah alone knows about it to the exclusion of others. With regard to what is indicated by evidence, it can be said that we know of the Unseen what the evidence indicates.*⁵

Basically, since the only information available about such matters is from the revealed texts, it is necessary to stop at what the texts explicitly say. If a question

⁴ Al-Ghazālī explains that since these matters are all rational possibilities, we cannot know by way of reason which possibilities are actualized in Creation. He writes: “What is known only by way of textual evidence (*sam‘*) is where one of the rational possibilities is actualized (by God), since it is all permitted by reason. These things are only known by way of revelation and inspiration, and we know about them from the revelation that reaches us, like the resurrection, the gathering of souls, reward and punishment, and the like.” Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī al-‘Itiqād* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988), 132.

⁵ Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2000), 2/27.

falls outside the texts' explicit pronouncements, it becomes obligatory to not commit oneself to any answer or position. Scholars of theology describe these matters as *tawqīfī*,⁶ meaning that knowledge about them is utterly reliant on the sacred texts. The methodological position they take on questions not directly addressed by those texts is consequently one of *tawaqquf* or theological non-commitment. Some of the well-known questions wherein prominent theologians took a position of non-commitment include whether pious people enjoy a higher spiritual status than the angels,⁷ whether God was seen directly on the night of the prophetic ascension,⁸ and whether the virtuous *Jinn* are admitted into Paradise in the Hereafter.⁹ A modern example would be the way many Muslim scholars have approached the question of dinosaurs.¹⁰

This approach of *tawaqquf* is an extremely conservative approach that is restricted to matters of belief that can be known only by way of revelation. It is applied to Allah's names, since scholars have determined that how Allah chooses to name Himself cannot be determined by human knowledge. It is applied to matters of the Unseen for the same reason. Angels are a good example. Their existence is only

⁶ Al-Bayjūrī defines *tawqīfī*, speaking in the context of Allah's names, as that which "the permissibility of asserting it about God depends on its being found in the Qur'an, the authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) or good (*ḥasan*) *Sunnah*, or consensus (*ijmā'*), for it never comes from anything beyond that." Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Bayjūrī, *Tuḥfah al-Murīd fī Sharḥ Jawharat al-Tawḥīd*. ed. Aḥmad al-Ajhūrī. 1st printing. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1983), 90.

⁷ Ibn Abī al-ʿIzz states: "This is one of the superfluous questions, so few theological scholars have discussed it. Abū Ḥanīfah took a non-committal stance (*tawaqquf*) in addressing it." ʿAlī Ibn Abī al-ʿIzz, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqīda al-Ṭaḥāwīyyah* ed. Dr. ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī and Shuʿayb al-ʿArnaʿūt. 2nd edition. (Beirut: Muʿassasah al-Risālah, 2003), 2/474.

⁸ Al-Qurṭubī states: "A group of scholars adopted a position of non-commitment (*tawaqquf*), arguing that there is no decisive evidence to affirm or deny its occurrence, though its occurrence is a rational possibility. This is the correct stance." Aḥmad b. ʿUmar al-Qurṭubī, *al-Muḥim limā Ashkala min Talkhīṣ Muslim*. ed. Muḥyī al-Dīn Dīb Mistū *et al.* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1999), 1/402.

⁹ Al-Alūsī attributes to al-Nasafī that: "Abū Ḥanīfa took a non-committal stance (*tawaqquf*) as to whether the *Jinn* are rewarded and granted eternal bliss (*naʿīm*), He said: 'The servant is not entitled to anything from God and only receives what is promised, and nothing is promised with respect to the *Jinn* except forgiveness and protection from punishment. As for the bliss of Paradise, that claim requires evidence.'" Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Amīn and ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām al-Salāmī. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turath al-ʿArabī, 1999), 26/263. Likewise, al-Qurṭubī quotes al-Qushayrī as saying: "The correct position is that this question is one in which we assert nothing with certainty. Knowledge on the matter is with God [alone]." Aḥmad b. ʿUmar al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʿan*, ed. ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 2001), 16/186. The verse of the Qur'an being referred to in this matter is: "Our people, respond to the Messenger of Allah and believe in him. God will forgive you your sins and protect you from a painful punishment." [*Sūrat al-Aḥqāf*: 31]

¹⁰ See: "Did the dinosaurs really exist?" *Islam Question and Answer*. ed. Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid. Accessed: 26 April 2018. <https://islamqa.info/en/166097>

known through revelation. The question of whether they possess wings, therefore, needs to be determined likewise through the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Once that is established, questions like what color the wings are, whether they sprout from the back or the arms, and whether they have feathers can only be determined with direct textual evidence. In the absence of such evidence, it is not permissible to fill in the blanks, since any suggestion would be baseless speculation. In short, when the Qur'an and *Sunnah* say something clear and unambiguous about a matter of the Unseen, it is to be accepted. However, classical theologians saw it as mandatory to stop where the texts stop and go no further. In matters of the Unseen, nothing should be assumed. The challenge for interpreters is that it is natural to make assumptions and fill in the gaps when reading a text, and it sometimes takes an effort to identify what has been assumed without evidence and is not actually mentioned by the texts.

This is different from interpreting texts related to matters of faith where various meanings are possible. In these cases, theologians hold that adhering to the most apparent (*zāhir*) meaning is the default position unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary.¹¹ This is the principle that a text should always be understood on its readily apparent meaning as long as such an interpretation is possible. If the context provides no reason to assume something other than the readily apparent meaning, it is considered wrong to reinterpret the text to mean anything else. When there is compelling evidence indicating that the most apparent meaning is not intended, theologians differ, with some of them allowing for a specific interpretation (*ta'wīl*) that accords with both the language of the text and with the contrary evidence, and others insisting upon a deferment (*tafwīd*) of specific knowledge on the matter while upholding the apparent meaning in general. Since there is ambiguity or uncertainty about the meaning of the text, any suggested interpretation cannot be taken as a tenet of faith. Al-Ghazālī writes:

¹¹ See: 'Abd Allah b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Qudāmah al-Maqdisī, *Rawḍah al-Nāzīr wa Jannah al-Munāzīr*. ed. Dr. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Namlah. 7th printing. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2003), 2/563.

*Whenever the textual evidence is certain in both its meaning and authenticity, without any chance of it being otherwise, then it must be believed with certainty. Where it is uncertain, then it must be believed to that extent.*¹²

Consequently, when the text is less than perfectly clear, assessing the level of uncertainty becomes crucial. In many cases, one of the possible meanings of a word, phrase, or passage will be more apparent than others.¹³ The context determines how clear this meaning is. However, the level of belief that it engenders will only be comparable to its level of textual certainty. Of course, interpreters will vary in determining this, depending on their backgrounds and their knowledge, including scientific knowledge.¹⁴ Therefore, it is important for a theologian to be as aware of what the texts are not saying as with what they are saying, so as not to mistake a personal assumption for a matter of religious creed. This is especially true for details pertaining to matters of the Unseen about which the Qur'an and *Sunnah* are silent. Theological non-commitment (*tawaqquf*) is required for such matters, since any suggestion made by the interpreter would be baseless speculation.

What implications does this methodological approach have for understanding the texts of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* that speak about the creation of Adam and Eve? How does this, in turn, affect the possible ways that traditionally-minded Muslims can view human evolution?

¹² Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād fī al-ʿItiqād* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1988), 132.

¹³ See: Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Abī ʿAlī al-Āmidī, *al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām*. ed. Ibrāhīm al-ʿAjūz. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, no date), 3/49.

¹⁴ Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī discusses *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (3326), a narration concerning Adam's height. It is a good example of where an interpreter's scientific knowledge forces him to reassess the level of textual certainty. The narration states: "God created Adam to be sixty cubits tall... Creation has kept getting smaller until now." Ibn Ḥajar says: "This poses a problem with respect to the artefacts that exist today from the nations of old, like the cities of Thamūd. Their buildings indicate that their stature was not exceptionally tall... Up to now, I have not come upon a solution to this problem." Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1998), 6/410. Ibn Ḥajar's approach here is to exercise *tawaqquf*, admitting he has no explanation. His knowledge of ancient artefacts makes the text's apparent meaning far less certain to him. Otherwise, he would probably have accepted its apparent meaning without question.

The Textual and Interpretive Background

The first step in answering this question is to look at the texts of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* that address the creation of Adam and Eve, particularly in the context of how classical scholars understood them, keeping in mind the principles outlined above. The creation of Adam and Eve falls under the category of the *sam' iyyāt*, since it is a matter of the Unseen. There is no historical, archaeological, or paleontological evidence for the creation of these two particular individuals. The only sources for this information are the sacred texts. Turning to the relevant passages in the Qur'an, we find it says that the human being was created from earth:

He created the human being from a dried mud like fired clay and created the *jinn* from a pure flame of fire. [*Sūrat al-Raḥmān*, 14-15]

We had created the human being from a dried, black mud. [*Sūrat al-Ḥajar*, 26]

And among his signs is that He created you from earth, then suddenly you were human beings dispersing. [*Sūrat Rūm*: 20]

These texts do not discuss the nature, quality, and composition of this earth, and there is no recourse to knowledge of it beyond the brief descriptions given in the Qur'an and a few *hadith*. Speculation on the matter would therefore fall outside the scope of what is permitted. These verses, taken on their own, do not say much about how human beings came about. However, the Qur'an also indicates that human beings are descended from a single couple:

O humankind, fear your Lord who created you from one soul and created from it its mate, and from the two of them brought forth many men and women. [*Sūrat al-Nisā'*, 1]

Less clear in its indication of a single couple is the following verse, though it is understood that way in light of the above-mentioned verse:

O humankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with God is the one who is the most God-fearing. [Sūrat al-Hujurāt:13]

Moreover, a *hadith* identifies Adam as being the male referred to in this particular verse:

Human beings are the children of Adam and Adam was created from Earth. God says: "Indeed We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so you may come to know one another. Indeed, the most honored of you with God are those of you who are the most pious." [Sunan al-Tirmidhī (3270)]

The Qur'an identifies Adam as being an individual created from earth:

Verily, the likeness of Jesus with God is the likeness of Adam. He created him from earth and then said to him: "Be!" and he was. [Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, 59]

The idea that Adam is a direct ancestor of all human beings living on the Earth today is reinforced in the Qur'an by its repeatedly addressing humanity as the Children of Adam (*Banū Ādam*); for instance, where it says:

O Children of Adam! Do not let Satan tempt you as he removed your two parents from Paradise. [Sūrat al-A'rāf: 27]

The *Sunnah* also attests to this idea. One *hadith* mentions that Adam will be addressed as the father of humanity by the believers on the Day of Resurrection when they ask him to intercede on their behalf with God:

The believers will gather together on the Day of Resurrection and say: "If we could seek intercession with our Lord." They will approach Adam and say: "You are the father of humanity. God created you with His hand and made the angels prostrate to you and taught you the names of all things, so intercede for us with your Lord so that He may relieve us of this place of ours." [*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (4476, 6565) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (193-195)]

Another *hadith* states that Moses addressed Adam as the father of humanity:

Adam won an argument with Moses. Moses had said to him: "O Adam, you are our father. You disappointed us and got us expelled from Paradise..." [*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6614) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2652)]

Classical Muslim scholars consider the following to be apparent from this body of textual evidence: Adam was created by God directly from earth. Both Adam and his wife were created by God without parents, and all human beings living on the Earth today are direct descendants of these two people. These are the conclusions that have been reached by all classical, orthodox commentators on these texts. For, instance, al-Ṭabarī says, commenting on the verse: "O humankind, fear your Lord who created you from one soul":

Here God is saying about Himself that He alone created all humanity from a single individual. He informs His servants how He originated their creation from a single soul, thereby making them aware that they are all the children of one father and mother and that they are all from one another, and that their rights upon one another are the obligatory rights of siblings, since they all

*descended from a single set of parents... however remote the point of hereditary conjunction to their common forefather might be.*¹⁵

Ibn Kathīr says, discussing the same verse:

*He brought forth from Adam and Eve numerous men and women, and spread them through the regions of the world with their various races, features, colors, and languages.*¹⁶

It is safe to say that the idea that Adam and Eve were directly created and were ancestors for all human beings living on the Earth in later times is something that has never been called into question by pre-modern Sunni scholarship, and that this assumption accords with the apparent meaning of the texts of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. This, then, can be regarded as the classical, orthodox Sunni position on the matter. The rest of the paper will take this to be the case and will not challenge it.

Does this conclusion, however, conflict with the prevailing scientific account of human evolutionary origins? Since belief in the existence of two specific people called Adam and Eve, for traditionally-minded Muslims, rests squarely upon the revealed texts, some scientifically-minded critics of this belief describe it as “mythology.” They often use the term pejoratively,¹⁷ and no doubt the word itself offends the sensibilities of some believers. We should bear in mind, however, that the term “myth” merely refers to the idea that some person or event is known to us only by way of a passed-down narrative and not by way empirical evidence. It does not say anything about the actual truth-value of the claim made about that person or event. The notion of Adam and Eve as “mythical” beings, though maybe not an excellent choice of words due to some negative connotations, is literally reminiscent of the way Sunni theologians have always looked at them, as a matter

¹⁵ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. ed. Dr. 'Abd Allah b. 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī. (Giza: Dār Hajar, 2001), 6/339.

¹⁶ Ismā'īl b. Kathīr. *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*. ed. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī. 2nd printing. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2002), 2/185.

¹⁷ For instance, Dawkins says: “Original sin itself comes straight from the Old Testament myth of Adam and Eve.” Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2007) 284.

of the Unseen which comes under the category of the *sam 'iyyat*, something that is known to us exclusively through scriptural sources without any empirical evidence. For believing Muslims, what matters is their conviction that those scriptural sources are from God, and that they are accepted as true. In fact, this argument can be turned against the critics of religion. If it could be argued that Adam and Eve are “mythical” in the sense that belief in them rests solely upon a person’s acceptance of the divine origins of the texts that speak about them, then by the same logic, it is impossible for science to critique the special creation of Adam and Eve. Biologists are not concerned with mythical beings. It would be ludicrous for a biologist to argue the merits or demerits of various theories regarding the mythical origins of mythical people or to talk about the evidence for their existence. The only time a scientist could think of objecting to a myth is where believers use that myth to explain specific natural phenomena. As long as that is not the case, then scientists have no grounds on which to argue.

Science makes claims about human biological origins. What needs to be done, then, is assess to what extent classical Islamic theology requires understanding the story of Adam and Eve to be an explanation for those origins.

Theological Implications for Human Evolution

To make this critical assessment, we need to ask: What theological consequences does the traditional understanding of Adam being created directly, without parents, have for Muslim acceptance or rejection of the idea that humans, as a species, evolved from other species of hominid ape? This question requires examining the account of Adam’s creation in light of what it says—and what it does not say—about human origins. This is needed to distinguish the mere assumptions that people make about it from what would actually be regarded as theologically binding upon Muslims. In other words, it needs to be determined where the principle of *tawaqquf*, theological non-commitment, must be applied.

The account of Adam that appears in the sacred texts addresses Adam’s direct creation without parents, his wife’s creation from him, and the idea that the two of them were ancestral to all people on Earth today. Those same texts are silent on what living organisms existed on Earth at the time. Therefore, nothing can be assumed about that on a theological level, and Muslims are not required to have any specific beliefs about it. Theologians would therefore not have grounds to claim that *Homo sapiens*, as defined by biologists in strictly physiological or genetic terms, were absent in the world before or during Adam’s time. They would have to remain non-committal on the matter.

Definitions matter. If someone were to define human beings as “the children of Adam,” then, by that definition, it would follow that “human beings” could not exist before Adam’s appearance. Of course, such a definition would have nothing to do with the physical or genetic characteristics that concern scientists. Moreover, Muslim theologians did not limit themselves to this idea when they defined human beings. Some were content to mention the ancient Greek definition of “rational animal” in their theological texts.¹⁸ Others preferred to define humans, in a theological sense, in a way that excluded all physical considerations. Indeed, al-Rāzī considers it to be incorrect to define the human being—at least where theological and philosophical matters are concerned—in physical, biological terms, since he sees the meaning of “humanness” to be independent of the physical appearance of “humanness.” He writes:

The third opinion is that the human being is an expression of physical bodies possessing the qualities of life, knowledge, and capability that are only distinct from other animals in their physical forms and the structure of their limbs. However, this is problematic, because the angels can come in forms that resemble those of human beings, so here we have the human form without humanness. Conversely, in the forms of transformed beings, we have the meaning of humanness being realized while the human form is not being

¹⁸ Sa’d al-Dīn Mas’ūd b. ‘Umar al-Taftazānī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafīyyah* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Madīnah, 2009), 62.

*realized. Therefore, the consideration of the physical form in determining the meaning of what is human is false from both directions.*¹⁹

Al-Rāzī then goes on to affirm that the human being is an entity that is neither the physical body nor anything of a physical nature and attributes this opinion to the majority of theologians, including al-Aṣfahānī and al-Ghazālī.²⁰

Certainly, the concept of the human being (*insān*) in Islam can have historical, scriptural, metaphysical, spiritual, and theological dimensions that are unique to Adam and his descendants. That is something for Muslim theologians to decide. However, these considerations are independent of the biological characteristics that biologists use to define the species *Homo sapiens*. The origin and development of that particular suite of biological traits within the animal kingdom is a question of biology, whereas the creation of Adam remains a question of faith. Theologians and biologists are asking different questions. Biologists, working within their field, have nothing to say about Adam, and theologians, working in their field, have nothing to say about how any biological species evolved. To do so is to transgress the limits of their respective disciplines.²¹

Biologists are concerned with the physical properties of the human being. When biologists say that humans are descended from other hominid ape species, they are referring to creatures possessing specific anatomical and genetic features that distinguish the genus *Homo* from other genera. They are not referring to humans in philosophical, metaphysical, spiritual, or theological terms. The same can be said of when they speak of the species *Homo sapiens*. They are only concerned with the suite of features and genetic markers that distinguish that species from other species of the same genus.

¹⁹ Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2000), 21/37-38.

²⁰ Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2000), 21/28.

²¹ This does not prevent Muslims, theologians included, from having opinions about biological questions. Muslim scientists, philosophers, and thinkers have discussed such things, as can be seen in the writings of al-Jāhiz, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, and Ibn Khaldūn. However, they did not do so in order to determine theological beliefs, and particularly not within the context of the orthodox approaches to theology this paper explores. Likewise, scientists can be religious, hold deep religious convictions, and even be religious scholars.

Though classical Muslim theologians would assert that every specimen of *Homo sapiens* alive today is from the “children of Adam” to whom the Qur’an repeatedly speaks, they would not be able to say anything about whether other organisms who fit the biological definition of *Homo sapiens* predated the appearance of Adam and Eve. As a consequence, they would not be able to object to the idea that the species *Homo sapiens* evolved from other species of the genus *Homo* which in turn evolved from other species of hominid ape in a line of descent ultimately going back to the earliest life forms on Earth. They would have to take a non-committal stance about human evolution. They would, on a theological level, neither accept it as true nor reject it as false. As individuals, they would be free to embrace whatever scientific position on hominid evolution they believe fits with the empirical evidence, since it is not a matter of religious faith, but strictly one of science.

The account of Adam’s special mode of creation, therefore, remains the story of Adam. It is not an account explaining the biological origins of the genus *Homo* or the species *Homo sapiens*. The idea that the story of Adam explains human biological origins is only an assumption people read into the texts, not something the texts indicate. This assumption is widely held by people today, and it clouds many discussions on the theological implications of human evolution, where we find the account of Adam’s origins being presented as if it is synonymous with an account of human biological origins. This is incorrect from the methodological approach of classical theology, since it over-extends what the texts are actually saying about a matter of the Unseen. Therefore, adherence to the principle of *tawaqquf*, which is to take a stance of theological non-commitment in matters of the Unseen not expressly stipulated by the sacred texts, means that the story of Adam must be kept separate from the question of the biological origins of *Homo sapiens*.

What, then, is the story of Adam? What are its theological dimensions? It is the story of a prophet of God, one of many such stories in the Qur’an, and the

particular miracles that pertain to him. As such, it is a matter of the Unseen, an account of the past that is known only by way of revelation and not through historical, archaeological, or anthropological accounts. It cannot be determined by empirical evidence and must be taken on faith. Like all other matters of the Unseen, it has no implications for science, and science, in turn, can pass no judgment over it.

Indeed, Adam's manner of creation, as described in the Qur'an, is understood by Muslim commentators and theologians to be something unique and miraculous. This would actually prevent theologians from taking Adam's creation as being representative of how other living things were created. Classical scholars understood the uniqueness of Adam's creation from where the Qur'an states that God created Adam with His "two hands":

O Satan, what prevented you from prostrating to that which I created with My two hands? Are you too proud or are you among the exalted? He (Satan) said: "I am better than he is. You created me from fire and You created him from mud. [Sūrat Ṣād, 75-76]

Regardless of how the scholars differed in interpreting the meaning of God's "two hands," there is general agreement that this verse indicates that the manner of Adam's creation was somehow special and distinct from the way(s) in which other things were created; this is clear from the context.

Ibn Taymiyyah mentions the different opinions held by Muslims with respect to the interpretation of the phrase "two hands," then says: "In any event, they all agree that Adam has favor and distinction not possessed by anything else on account of God creating him with His two hands."²²

Al-Bayhaqī likewise discusses the various interpretations that can be applied to the phrase "two hands" and rules out the idea that they could convey the same meaning

²² Ahmad b. Taymiyyah, *Majmū' al-Fatāwā* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Obeikan, 1998), 4/366.

as the “hands” mentioned in verse 71 of *Sūrat Yāsīn*.²³ He comes to this conclusion on the grounds that doing so would negate the honor and distinction that the verse is clearly conferring on Adam over Satan. He writes:

*It cannot be interpreted to mean... (God’s) power, dominion, or providence, or be taken as an emphatic reference to the subject, because this would be something equally applicable to God’s devotee Adam and to His enemy Satan. This would negate what is mentioned of the favor that Adam has over Satan, since any meaning of distinction would be lost. There is no alternative but to interpret them as two attributes that relate to the creation of Adam—as an honor to him—that do not apply to the creation of Satan.*²⁴

Al-Bayḍāwī writes:

*“I created with my two hands” meaning: “I created Him by Myself without the intermediary step of a mother or father.” The mention of two hands is on account of what his creation entailed of additional capability and dissimilarity of action.*²⁵

Ibn Taymiyyah continues his discussion of this point by referring to some *hadith* in which the manner in which Adam was created is mentioned as one of the distinctions that he has over the rest of created things.²⁶ He cites Moses enumerating Adam’s distinctive qualities and mentions among these qualities the mode by which he was created:

²³ “Do they not see that We have created for them – from among the things Our hands have wrought – cattle, which are in their possession?” Al-Bayhaqī interprets the “hands” of this verse as indicating an emphatic reference to the subject – *i.e.* “from what We Ourselves have wrought.” See: *Kitāb al-Asmā’ wa al-Ṣifāt* (2/49). For Ibn Taymiyyah’s discussion on the difference in meaning between this verse and verse 75 of *Sūrah Sād*, refer to: *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Obeikan, 1998), 3/45-46 or separately as *al-Aqīdat al-Tadmuriyya*. ed. Dr. Muḥammad b. ‘Awdah al-Sa’wī. 6th edition. (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Obeikan, 2000), 73-75. See also: *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā*, 6/370-372.

²⁴ Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-Asmā’ wa al-Ṣifāt*. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2002), 2/49.

²⁵ ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl*. ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mar‘ashlī. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turath al-‘Arabī, 1998), 5/35.

²⁶ Ahmad b. Taymiyyah, *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Obeikan, 1998), 4/366.

Adam won an argument with Moses. Moses had said to him: “You are Adam whom God created with His hand and breathed into you of His spirit and made the angels prostrate to you and gave you to dwell in Paradise. Then you brought humanity down with your mistake to the Earth...” [Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (2652)]

Ibn Taymiyyah then cites another *hadith* foretelling that the believers will mention Adam’s distinctions to him when they plead with him to intercede on their behalf on the Day of Resurrection:

The believers will gather together on the Day of Resurrection and say: “If we could seek intercession with our Lord.” They will approach Adam and say: “You are the father of humanity. God created you with His hand and made the angels prostrate to you and taught you the names of all things, so intercede for us with your Lord so that He may relieve us of this place of ours.” [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (4476, 6565) and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (193-195)]

Ibn Taymiyyah comments on these two *hadith*, saying:

This is enumerated as one of the blessings that God had bestowed upon Adam when Moses said to him: “God created you with His two hands...” Likewise, it will be said to him on the Day of Resurrection. This is mentioned among the blessings that God had bestowed upon him exclusively and that other created things do not share with him. This is a clear indication of his preferential status over the rest of Creation.²⁷

Another verse theologians cite is where the Qur’an compares Adam’s creation with the creation of Jesus:

²⁷ Ahmad b. Taymiyyah, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Obeikan, 1998), 4/366.

Verily, the likeness of Jesus with God is the likeness of Adam. He created him from earth and then said to him: “Be!” and he was. [Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān, 59]

Al-Nasafī explains this comparison as follows in his commentary on the verse:

He created Adam from earth without the agency of a father or mother. Likewise is the case with Jesus, even though coming into existence without a father or mother is stranger and more miraculous (akhraq lil- ‘ādah) than coming into existence without a father. Therefore, He compares that which is strange to that which is stranger...²⁸

The exact nature of how Adam’s creation by “two hands” was distinct from the process of creation for other things is not discernible from the texts. However, these texts are evidence enough to indicate that the mode of Adam’s creation was somehow unique. Consequently, there is no reason for theologians to assume that the creation of other life forms had to follow the same pattern as the creation of Adam.

Al-Alūsī, while discussing the verse “*O mankind, fear your Lord who created you from one soul and created from it its mate...*” quotes Zayn al-‘Arab going so far as to declare as unbelief the Twelver Shi’ite claim²⁹ that God independently created numerous thousands of unique Adams in succession, each with his own progeny. Al-Alūsī then says, concurring with Zayn al-‘Arab’s incredulousness, if not necessarily with his ruling of unbelief:

²⁸ ‘Abd Allah b. Aḥmad al-Nasafī, *Madārik al-Tanzīl wa Ḥaqā’iq al-Ta’wīl*. ed. Marwān Muḥammad al-Sha‘‘ār. (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā’is, 1996), 1/242.

²⁹ It is related by Ibn Bābawayh in *al-Tawḥīd* that Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq said: “Perhaps you see that God never created a human being other than yourselves. Nay, but God had created a million Adams and you are of the last of those Adams.” Maytham al-Baḥrānī relates in *al-Sharḥ al-Kabīr ‘alā Nahj al-Balāgha* from al-Bāqir: “Before the Adam who is our father, a million Adams or more had passed from existence.” Quoted in: Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī*. ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Amīn and ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām al-Salāmī. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turath al-‘Arabī, 1999), 4/531-532). These reports have no authority according the conditions set forth by the scholars of *hadith*.

*This Adam of ours was preceded by other creations like the angels, the Jinn, numerous animals, and other things about which only God has knowledge, but not by a creation of the likes of him.*³⁰

Why was Adam's mode of creation of such an exceptional manner? From what preceded, we have seen the theologians repeatedly assert that it was as a sign of distinction and honor for him, and by extension, for his descendants. This is understood from the context of the verse where God challenges Satan by asking: *O Satan, what prevented you from prostrating to that which I created with My two hands?* It is also understood as being an honor when mentioned by Moses and by people on the Day of Resurrection.

To the extent that Adam's mode of creation is regarded by theologians to be a miracle showing honor to Adam and his descendants, it would be understood to be contrary to the natural order of things, not indicative of that order. Adam's mode of creation would not be seen as an archetype representing the mode by which other genera or species were created. Consequently, it would not inform anything on a biological level. It is the story of an individual, one of the many stories of the prophets in the Qur'an.

Muslims who accept the traditional account of Adam's creation, therefore, would have no reason to object to the idea that the biological species *Homo sapiens* evolved from other species of hominid and shares a common genetic origin with all other living things. They could accept this fully and without reservation, while also accepting on faith that Adam was specially and miraculously created by God for reasons best known to Him, and that he is a forefather to all people living today. That is the limit of what a traditional approach to the texts requires to be taken as a

³⁰ Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*. ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Amīn and 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām al-Salāmī. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turath al-'Arabī, 1999), 4/532. This is from his commentary on *Sūrat al-Nisā'*: 1. Al-Alūsī's follows this statement by saying, "He is contingent as a species and as an individual, in contrast to the claim of some philosophers that the human species is eternal." The statement that Adam and the human species are contingent means that they existed after having not existed. Here, al-Alūsī is bringing up another topic, that of refuting the claim of some peripatetic philosophers who considered both the Earth and the human species to be eternal in their antiquity. This is independent of his refutation of the Shi'ite claim that God created thousands of unique Adams in historical succession. The contingency of the human species is obvious; in fact, it is necessary simply upon the belief that the universe itself is contingent and does not stretch back eternally into the past.

matter of faith. Therefore, Muslims would not be obligated to deny the idea of human evolution in order to remain faithful.

Conversely, by being such a miraculous event, by its very nature it falls outside the scope of scientific enquiry. Scientists cannot disprove the story of Adam's creation any more than they can disprove any other miracle. Such stories, by their nature, are accepted by believers on faith. Science does not investigate claims of singular and supernatural acts of God's intervention. They simply do not fall within its scope.

The same distinction between theological and scientific considerations applies to the belief that the people on Earth today are descended from Adam. This is, as we have determined, the position of classical Islamic theology. Anyone who believes this cannot doubt that Adam's descendants have diversified in color, stature, and physical appearance as they spread throughout the Earth. In the absence of any unequivocal textual evidence describing Adam's earliest descendants in detail, there would be no way to gauge the extent or rate of genetic and phenotypic change that has taken place among Adam's later progeny. Therefore, scriptural evidence cannot be used by theologians to indicate whether Adam's earliest descendants would have been classified biologically as *Homo sapiens* or possibly as some earlier human species. This means that theologians would not attempt answers to questions like whether *Homo neanderthalis* were from Adam's descendants, any more than they could argue whether or not creatures that scientists would classify as being biologically *Homo sapiens* had already evolved on Earth and were populating it before Adam's arrival upon it. All the evidence for hominid evolution, up to and including the evolution of *Homo sapiens* in a direct line of descent, is empirical, and there is nothing in Islamic scriptures that confirms or contradicts the existence of those hominids. Consequently, it is not a matter of religious belief to accept or reject the scientific account of hominid evolution up to and including organisms which are taxonomically *Homo sapiens*. It remains purely a scientific question. From a scriptural standpoint, it is not possible to determine

precisely when Adam and Eve made their appearance on Earth nor whether they may have met any pre-existing hominid species.

Could there have been hominid species prior to Adam? Scripture does not rule it out. Could these hominid species have co-existed with Adam and his descendants? Again, there is nothing explicit from scripture to negate this. Could the descendants of Adam have intermarried with other populations that were already present on Earth? Once again, scripture is silent.³¹ The theological stance of *tawaqquf* necessitates that we refrain from affirming or negating such scenarios in the absence of direct scriptural evidence, as all such questions constitute baseless speculation about matters of the Unseen. Addressing such scenarios is of neither scientific nor theological importance, since the sacred texts do not bring them up and science does not deal with them. What matters is that a belief in the Adam's direct creation does not prevent Muslims who hold that belief from accepting the possibility that beings who were biologically human could have evolved on Earth from other species, beings identical in every way to the descendants of Adam. This means that traditionally-minded Muslims would still be able to view humanity biologically in the context of a broader evolutionary perspective and engage actively in the scientific investigation of human biological evolution without hesitation.

If God created all the creatures by way of evolution and then decided to honor one individual member of one species by creating it *ex nihilo*, then there is no reason to assume that He would be obliged to furnish that individual with physical or genetic markers to set it and its descendants apart from their fellow creatures. A distinction

³¹ The Qur'an addresses its audience as *Banū Ādam*. This provides a strong implication that all human beings on Earth at the time the scripture speaks to them are direct descendants of Adam. This remains true even if Adam's descendants intermarried with members of pre-existing populations, as long as everyone shares their lineage with Adam in some way. Would it have to be through the male line, since in Islamic Law, lineage is established this way? Not necessarily. For one thing, Islamic teachings accept the idea that the Law manifested to earlier peoples could be different than the final form it took with the advent of Islam. Even during the time of revelation, laws changed over time. Therefore, matrilineal descent could not be ruled out as having been allowed at one time. Also, even in the context of Islamic Law, the Prophet's descendants are recognized through his grandchildren al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn from his daughter Fāṭimah, showing a limited application of matrilineal descent within the context of Islamic Law. Therefore, *tawaqquf* must be applied to the possibility of intermarriage between Adam's descendants and possible pre-existing populations, since there is no definitive scriptural evidence one way or the other.

enjoyed by Adam was the honor he had in God's regard, but this was not necessarily due to some physical or mental characteristic, and even if it were, we have no way of pinpointing with any level of certainty what that characteristic might be. The distinctions that can be found in the *hadith*, as we have seen, are all honors that God bestowed on Adam, and not inherent physical or mental qualities. Therefore, the idea that Adam was directly created does not make his descendants any less a part of the broader biological human family that they are genetically a part of, any more than Jesus being born of a virgin makes him any less human—biologically or otherwise. Admittedly, Jesus's miraculous birth has a direct consequence on his historical lineage—he is not attributed to the family of any man but rather called “the son of Mary”—but his membership in the broader human family is not in the least way compromised.

The Qur'an emphasizes that Jesus is fully human in every possible sense of the word, right down to the most basic of physical needs:

The Messiah, the son of Mary, was none other than a Messenger; other Messengers had passed away before him. And his mother was a truthful one. They both used to eat food. Look how We make clear to them the signs.
[*Sūrat al-Mā'ida*: 75]

This verse comes to refute the claim that Jesus was divine.³² In Islamic thinking, it is seen as a fatal error to take the virgin birth of Christ as proof that he was somehow other than fully human. This is understood to be what led to the Christian doctrine of divinity in Christ—either as having a dual nature, both human and divine, or as being wholly divine. In this verse, Christ is compared in his biological nature to other human beings in the fact that he was born and in the fact that both he and his mother ate food.³³ The idea of his divinity is also refuted in the Qur'an by likening the creation of Jesus to that of Adam, as we have already discussed.

³² See: Ismā'īl b. Kathīr.. *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*. ed. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī. 2nd printing. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2002), 2/583. See also: Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2000), 12/52.

³³ Aḥmad b. 'Umar al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'an*, ed. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2001), 6/235.

There is no evidence that God created physical markers to distinguish Jesus from his fellow humans to highlight his unique mode of creation. Jesus looked like everyone else. So why would it have to be the otherwise for Adam?

It must be conceded that the example of Adam is more extreme than that of Jesus, since a directly-created Adam has no direct physical kinship to any other being whereas Jesus does have a direct biological kinship to his mother. Just as Jesus cannot be attributed to any man before him, a directly-created Adam and Eve cannot be attributed to any particular individuals—from *Homo sapiens* or otherwise—who might have lived before them or contemporaneously with them. This is a historical, genealogical position that Muslims who adopt it can only accept on faith. All the same, just as Jesus is fully part of the human family—and in spite of having no father to provide a Y chromosome is fully a man—Adam’s descendants can be seen as full members of the broader human family as well as of the animal kingdom and, in fact, all living things, with which they share an unquestionable genetic kinship.

Science, for its part, can only speak about the empirical evidence it finds, which indicates that *Homo sapiens* evolved from other hominid species. If an individual specimen of one species were created by God *ex nihilo*, this would leave no empirical trace for scientists to identify. For believers, it would be a miracle, grounded in scripture, and by definition, beyond the laws of nature—something which science cannot address and has no interest in exploring.

Conclusion

It is possible for traditionally-minded Muslims to accept human evolution without reservation and without having to reinterpret the texts about the creation of Adam and Eve to mean anything other than what classical Muslim theologians have taken them to mean. In other words, they can accept the idea that biological organisms classified as *Homo sapiens* might have evolved from earlier hominids while still

upholding the belief that Adam and Eve were created without parents and that all human beings on earth today are Adam and Eve's descendants.

These are two separate and unrelated issues established in two very different ways. Muslims have no need to discuss biological human evolution from a theological or scriptural perspective. Likewise, scientists have no need to discuss the life of Prophet Adam from an empirical, scientific perspective. It is possible for a person to believe in human evolution, based on scientific evidence, and dismiss the story of Adam being created without parents, as some Muslims do who choose not to follow the classical interpretive strategies I am exploring. Atheists and followers of non-Abrahamic religions would simply dismiss the idea that Adam existed. However, none of them could furnish scientific evidence to prove that Adam did not exist or that he was not created in a unique manner. It is equally possible for someone to believe in the story of Adam, like traditionally-minded Muslims do, and then deny human evolution for whatever reasons they might have, like not being convinced by the empirical evidence. However, they would not be able to base their denial of human evolution on theological or scriptural grounds, since there is no basis in scripture for doing so. Likewise, a person can accept both ideas, since there is no inherent contradiction between them. Finally, it is possible for someone to reject both ideas for whatever personal reasons they might have, but they would be at variance with orthodox Islamic theology for rejecting the story of Adam's creation and at variance with the scientific consensus for rejecting evolution.

The conflicts we see in Muslim communities today have arisen because the scriptural texts have been over-interpreted by contemporary Muslims who, having been confronted with the question of human biological origins, took the Adam and Eve story to be an account of those biological origins. This is just an assumption they make that overreaches what is found in the texts and which violates the principle of theological non-commitment (*tawaqquf*) required when dealing with matters of the Unseen. The resultant confusion between the creation story of Adam on the one hand and human biological origins on the other, has brought about

unnecessary resistance to the idea of human evolution among some traditionally-minded Muslims who nevertheless identify with theological traditions for which this should never have been a problem.