

Muslims must be free to debate issues such as evolution without fear

The hounding of an imam for his pro-evolution views only plays to anti-Muslim prejudice



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The Guardian, Friday 8 April 2011

The imam of a mosque in east London, Dr Usama Hasan, was earlier this year subjected to death threats over his support for the theory of evolution. Whatever the underlying reasons, and there are clearly other tensions within the mosque, we must categorically condemn tactics of intimidation and the suppression of diverse opinions within the Muslim community. Those in Europe who see Muslims as a threat to western values will see this episode as a further validation of their stereotypical viewpoint of Muslims. We should take care, however, not to let extreme positions on both sides define the issue.

The reality of Muslim attitudes to evolution is more complex. In this, Muslims are not alone. A survey in 2009 found that 60% of all British young adults – irrespective of religious belief – believe in intelligent design to a greater or lesser extent. But there is no "official" position of Islam on evolution. Many in the Muslim world reject evolution, while there are others who accept it. In places like Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, the fundamental concepts of evolution are included in high-school biology textbooks. Furthermore, in 2006, the national science foundations from several Muslim-majority countries endorsed a statement by the Inter-Academy Panel (IAP) supporting common descent and the evolution of humans from prior species.

That said, human evolution can pose a difficult challenge to the beliefs of many religious people. But a serious debate on this has yet to take place in most Muslim communities. For many, the conception of evolution is erroneously limited to a theory of "monkey-to-man" and it is often associated with atheism. There are others who have never really thought about the issue and are less concerned with it beyond the practical applications

of evolutionary ideas to biotechnology and biomedicine.

Dr Hasan, who is also a senior lecturer in engineering at Middlesex University, has lamented this very lack of serious engagement in some of his recent writings. His opponents in the mosque, however, have seized upon some of his comments not to open a dialogue on this matter but rather to use it as an excuse to demand his ousting. Under intense pressure, Dr Hasan retracted some of his statements. In particular, he withdrew the assertion that Adam had parents.

The current controversy is not only about evolution. In places like Pakistan and Egypt, we are seeing a diverse range of reactions, especially regarding non-human evolution. In Europe, however, just like the issue of hijab, the rejection of evolution is increasingly becoming an issue of identity and may serve as a cultural marker among Muslim-minority populations.

A controversy such as this allows the extreme elements – both those who portray all Muslims as a threat to Europe, and those who claim that rejection of evolution is the only Muslim position – to stake their claims on it. We should resist the urge to settle for oversimplified positions that cater to stereotypes and crowd out more nuanced views.

There are many Muslim scientists out there, including evolutionary biologists, who have been able to successfully reconcile evolution with their faith. The episode of Dr Hasan should be seen within its local context, and we must resist the temptation to derive a general Muslim position on evolution from this controversy. At the same time, we must stress the importance of open dialogue and insist on a safe space for the discussion of controversial topics.



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