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*Harun Yahya's Religious Message
between Local Decline and Global Success:
What Is Islamic in (his) "Islamic Creationism"?*

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International CESNUR – ISSNR Conference
**THE VITALITY OF NEW RELIGIONS: THINKING
GLOBALLY, EXISTING LOCALLY**
Waco, Texas, 4-7 June 2014
The George W. Truett Theological Seminary -
Baylor University

A research project blending *philosophy of science*,
philosophy of religion and *Islamology*

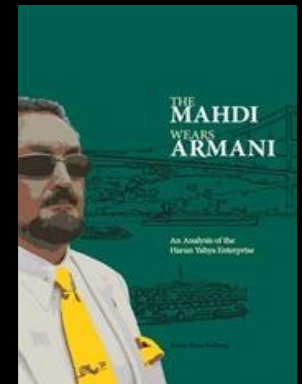
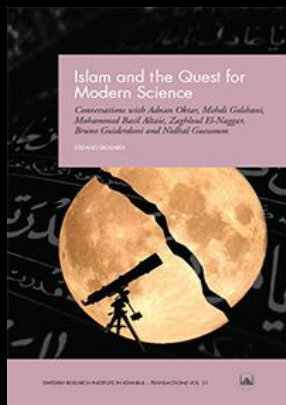
(method: text analysis & interviews)

1 – Who is Adnan Oktar/Harun Yahya?

Local decline and global success

2 – Harun Yahya’s “philosophy of nature”

3 – Beyond “Islamic Creationism”: possible reasons of a global
success



Who are *Adnan Oktar* and *Harun Yahya*?

***Creationism* has gone global and, in the Muslim world, it is mainly associated with one *pen-name*:**

Harun Yahya.

Behind this pseudonym, that evokes the Prophets Aaron and John, is a whole enterprise whose public face is the Turkish writer, religious leader, and TV personality



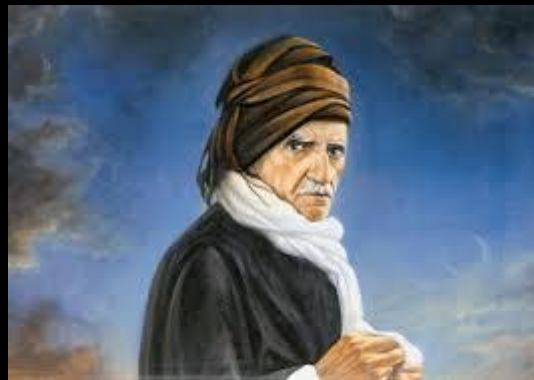
Adnan Oktar

(b. 1956, Ankara)



Adnan Oktar

- He studied **philosophy** and **interior architecture design**.
- Anti-Darwinist **preacher** Influenced by Said Nursi (1878-1960).
- 1986: accusation of promoting a theocratic revolution – 19 months in jail.
- He managed to gather around himself a group of students from well-off families. Such group gradually took on the form of a **sect**, whose activities and internal dynamics repeatedly raised the attention of Turkish authorities.
- 1990: he founded the *Scientific Research Foundation*. The *Foundation for Protection of National Values* followed in 1995.
- Legal troubles: hospitalization in a psychiatric institution - several imprisonments and indictments for possession of cocaine, sexual harassment, blackmailing of collaborators.



Adnan Oktar

- He makes no mystery about his troubles. In interviews and presentations on his websites he is described as extraordinary and outstandingly devout. His troubles are either the result of the occult agencies or God's tests.
- Over the past two years Oktar has intensified his initiatives and diversified his contributions as an opinion-maker. He runs and appears on a television channel (A9). He sits with men and women whose beauty he emphatically praises, discussing politics and world affairs.
- Must have powerful enemies and friends alike (cf. his battle against Richard Dawkins, 2008).
- A new version of Islam: technological, modern, liberal...



Harun Yahya

(I am more interested in HY. Adnan Oktar's life is part and parcel of Yahya's narrative.)

Harun Yahya's productivity is outstanding. Up to and including fall 2013, almost 300 books in Turkish have been published under his name, more than 200 of which have been translated into English.

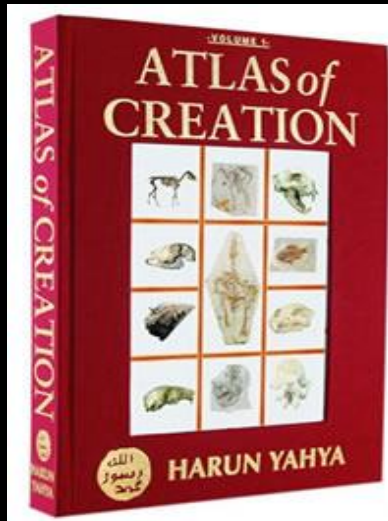
Yahya's articles in Turkish listed on his official website number more than 2000 and his English publications reach approximately 1500. Translations are available in sixty languages, all widely advertised through more than 150 constantly updated websites.

Oktar is unlikely to have written (and read) all of Yahya's works. Their original nucleus is produced by a team whereas the translations are commissioned to, or more probably spontaneously carried out by, sympathizers the world over.

The *Atlas of Creation*

In 2007 Yahya sent the gigantic and luxurious first tome of his Atlas of Creation (768 glossy pages, 5.4 kg, 27,5 x 37,5 cm, images in lenticular printing on the hard cover that create an illusion of motion), unsolicited and free of charge, to natural science teachers, research institutions, and libraries throughout Europe and North America.

The second tome followed in 2013.



Harun Yahya's Message

- **Darwinian evolutionist doctrines** are the **source of all the violent and repressive phenomena of the last century** such as terrorism and totalitarianisms (communism and fascism alike), all rejected on a par with racism, romanticism, capitalism, Buddhism, and Zionism (which after a flirt with Holocaust denial in the Nineties to date he explicitly distinguishes from Judaism).
- He claims that they received constant support throughout the millennia by **freemasonry**, whose agency he describes as the principal occult actor of history in all its anti-religious manifestations.
- Yahya sees in Darwin the major advocate of evolutionism, however he claims as well that evolutionist doctrines date back even to ancient Greeks and Egyptians.
- Yahya rejects Darwinism following a double-track criticism: on the one hand he points out its moral consequences, whose disastrous effects he envisages in history. On the other hand he claims that Darwinism lacks scientific proof.
- Yahya endorses an **ecumenical and messianic form of Islam** based on a return to religious values which have its symbols and examples in the Prophets. The time of the coming of a last prophet or **Mahdi** is near; he will appear and begin his activity in **Turkey**. This Mahdi is very similar to Oktar.
- Yahya regards all the features and elements of the universe as clear proofs of the existence of God. According to Yahya everything in the universe is necessary, which means necessarily made for human life and, conversely, necessarily pointing at the existence of God.

Harun Yahya's Global Success

- Despite Oktar's dubious reputation in his home country, his extravagant TV appearances, and the shortcomings of his/Yahya's books from a scholarly point of view, Yahya still enjoys worldwide respect by readers who are either unaware of his whimsicality or do not give any importance to it.
- In 2010, Yahya was selected among **the top 500 most influential Muslims** by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Jordan.
- Considering the ambition expressed by the initiative of sending out the tomes of the *Atlas of Creation* to institutions all over the world, and the general appeal of all such discussions to different audiences, it seems safe to assume that the most relevant aspect (that is, the one most likely to endure and to entice a global audience) of Yahya's production is his creationism.

The reasons of a global success

- The stylistic features of his works.
 - (1) God's existence (and hence faith) are taken as the object of a structured, "rational" argumentation within which **proofs are given and discussed**.
 - (2) The books are written in a style that **mimics scientific popularization** with, for instance, quotations from scientists, usage of schemata and "data," footnotes (albeit incomplete ones), and so forth.
 - (3) The discussion **targets the famous (and famously connected to science) doctrine of Darwinism as its antagonist**; it is apparently discussed on a footing of equality with experts by criticizing it, offering "proofs," asking for counterproofs, and so on.
 - (4) Yahya takes proofs as the "facts" of the "natural world" that are presented as what natural sciences examine or are constituted of. Such "facts" fuse, and practically end up coinciding with, the **graphic representation of facts that constitute a "hyper-reality" in which the verbal discussion is literally inscribed**. The pictures are doctored and assembled in order to enhance their visual appeal. The beauty with which they are then conceptually associated in the verbal part of the discourse becomes itself a "fact" that is used as a "proof."

Common strategies in marketing/ new religions' PR

- Scientific-sounding advertisements: cf. shampoo advertised referring to its “pH”.
- Jehovah’s Witnesses propose a “biblical study”: a religious message is presented with the credentials of a scholarly, objective discipline.
- The Raelians’ website hosts a page of scientific news proving to be “science friendly” and scientifically updated.
- Scientology hijacks science’s prestige from its very name and tries to gain prestige while antagonizing psychiatry.
- A visual hyper-reality is a common marketing strategy: all the magazines devoted to scientific popularization count on the visual appeal of the “facts” they represent to sell more copies
- Jehovah’s Witnesses: enticing pictures of nature and the universe.



What is *Islamic* in HY's creationism?

Islam influences some thematic and stylistic devices in Yahya's overall production (usage of Qur'anic verses, reference to the Mahdi, specific narratives) and some modes of production concerning Yahya's visual hyper-reality— for instance, a direct representation of God is not allowed.

Yet the presence of Islamic elements has to be considered in the context of, and compared with, other elements of such a message. **An inspection of the *Atlas* reveals that Islamic/Qur'anic references and narratives are diluted and rather marginal.**

As I see it, Islam ends up providing an extrinsic garb in which Yahya's religious message about God and nature is wrapped. In other words, Islam is not constitutive of Yahya's message's inner logic - that is, the **scientification** of a religious message.

Conclusions

- Yahya's appeal should be taken as indicative of some cultural dynamics. Relevant in such dynamics is of course **the way in which biological evolution is taught, perceived, and discussed.**
- The fact that Yahya can find so many sympathisers points at some objective difficulties in understanding and popularizing not just biological evolution but, more generally, natural science. **It is parasitic on "the unnatural nature of science," the non-commonsensical (and therefore easily misunderstood or misrepresented) method and object of science;** with science's prestige all are exploited in a media-savvy way.
- It can also be asked whether such discourse is really harmful for the promotion and development of science in (Muslim) societies or whether it rather fills a natural gap by creating a reassuring message for a scientifically illiterate or semi-literate audience.

Thank you! – Any questions?

Further reading

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