

## Shoaib Malik's "Islam and Evolution"

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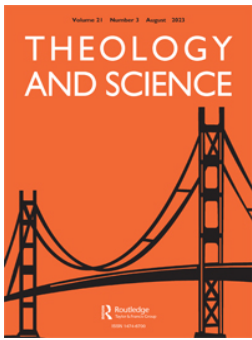
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# Shoaib Malik's "Islam and Evolution": Sociological Reflections on the Developing Engagement of British Muslim Leadership with Science

Saleema F. Burney 

## ABSTRACT

Sociological studies of Islam and science in the West have developed in the past two decades. This response is positioned in the light of one such study (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/ptr/projects/science-british-muslim-religious-leadership.aspx>). It argues that Malik's work is part of emerging transatlantic networks of learning and authority in Islam and science discourses. It suggests that Muslim leadership is now shifting in favour of informed engagement with science/religion topics, and that Malik's book both exemplifies this shift, but also addresses an urgent need for scholarship that brings Islamic theological principles into dialogue with modern scientific topics.

## KEYWORDS

Islam; Muslims; science; evolution; theology; sociology

## Introduction

The year was 2008, and a hitherto esteemed Islamic scholar and scientist penned an article in the well-respected British newspaper *The Guardian*.<sup>1</sup> Having reflected at length on theories of evolution during his training as an astronomer and physicist, alongside his deeply Islamic background as an Imam hailing from a long line of respected South Asian scholars, Usama Hasan had decided it was time to make his views public. In an opinion piece, Hasan called for the Muslim world to debate the issue of evolution "without fear" and decried the "appalling state of science in the Muslim world".<sup>2</sup> What happened in the aftermath of this, however, is what concerns us here. Hasan became the target of avid criticism from Muslim scholarly and community circles, and even received threats to his life. He was eventually forced to step down from his role as a long-standing Imam and prominent Muslim figure, and has to this day not returned to a religious leadership role. While Hasan's excommunication and withdrawal from the Muslim community came about for a host of reasons (mosque politics, family dynamics, sectarian affiliations), it is his views on evolution and Muslim "creationism" that led to a loss of congregational, and even national, confidence in his validity as a religious leader. For many years after, Hasan's story came to typify Muslim beliefs around evolution and creationism in the public imagination, fed by a frenzied media storm polarised both for and against him.<sup>3</sup> Inayat Bunglawala, a well-known Muslim leader

who spoke up against the treatment Hasan received, reflected at the time that “if his congregation do reject him, then it may well deter other imams from undertaking a study of evolution and speaking about what they have learnt”.<sup>4</sup>

Fast forward roughly fifteen years, and we find that both the appetite for, and the environment around, Islam and science discussions has shifted considerably. The first sociological study of the views and engagement of British Muslim religious leaders on science, “Science and the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge” (STIK), conducted over two years (2021-23) by the author and her colleagues, reports that:

What seemed clear from our research, then, is that it is, at best, simplistic to regard Muslim leaders simply as a driver of anti-evolutionary perspectives. Furthermore, the discussion of Islam and evolution in the UK appears to be moving on from some of the challenges of the past (a view held by a number of our interviewees). Driven by ongoing changes in character of Islamic education and leadership in the UK, discussion of and reflection on evolution and the Qur’an is becoming more open, even if it is not yet fully “above ground”.<sup>5</sup>

It was during this research that the author came across the work of Dr. Shoaib Malik, who holds two doctorates, one in Engineering and the other in Theology. Clearly, Malik had not been deterred from expressing his views by previous community reactions to the evolution debate, and his interventions typify the creative new spaces and discourses that the STIK team documented during the course of their study. *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* sits at the nexus of a long-overdue dialogue between Islamic theological positions and modern science; more crucially, it addresses the contentious topic of evolution, and does so independently of the Christian tradition within which the debate is most often framed. In a highly readable and clearly structured format, Malik’s book has spurred a nascent discussion internal to Muslim communities.

In particular, the research team found evidence of how Malik’s work is improving the understanding of evolutionary science amongst Muslim leaders in Britain, and even causing previously sceptical scholars to reassess their views. We were told by senior scholars that Malik’s scholarship is “bridging these narratives” (female scholar and scientist); that when struggling with personal beliefs and evolution, some found Malik’s book and are now “very in tune with his ideas” (male scholar and educationalist); above all, those of our respondents who have engaged with Malik’s writings now feel empowered because they have been shown that “there are ways that we can deal with it” (male scholar and teacher). Perhaps the best indication of the success of Malik’s book in the cautious terrain of Islamic leadership and evolutionary science is summed up in a tongue-in-cheek remark by a previously sceptic scholar and university lecturer: “My beliefs on this have undergone an evolution, as it were!”.

In the discussion below, this article first develops the background to Muslim engagement with science, enhanced by a deeper look at the existing sociological data on Muslim beliefs around evolution. The reader is then introduced to the STIK project; the latter part of this paper then brings Malik’s work into conversation with the findings of this project. In doing so, it is hoped that the value to Muslim communities of Malik’s scholarship and parallel community engagement can be understood, and appreciated. Finally, and again based on her research experiences of the Islam and science field in Britain, the author puts forward suggestions for future engagement in this area.

## The Sociology of Science and Islam: What We Know

Sociological surveys and interview data tell us that in Britain, there is widespread public belief that religion and science are incompatible. According to a recent survey of public attitudes to religion, 37.7% agreed with the statement that “Science and religion are fundamentally incompatible”.<sup>6</sup> The picture, furthermore, around public perceptions of religious people worsens when we bring Islam and Muslims into the mix; the same study also tells us that approximately a quarter of the British public have a negative view of Muslims, and that 64% of the sample studied thought that Islam “had a negative impact on society”.<sup>7</sup> Combined with the very high levels of Islamophobic prejudice in Britain,<sup>8</sup> these figures make for sobering reading.

Unfortunately, data on Muslim beliefs about science is not plentiful, and at the same time beliefs such as those above about the “irrational” and harmful nature of Islam remain largely unchallenged. The few studies that we do have on Muslim beliefs around science focus largely on the topic of evolution. However, one cannot assume the existence of robust data even on Muslim beliefs around evolution; survey data on evolution is based on simplistic questions, often betraying the preconceptions of Western-trained researchers themselves (Malik himself argues this point in his book). In addition, this data fails to capture the nuance and complexity that exists in Muslim viewpoints, and thus suggests a literalist and rigid approach to modern science.

In a rare and insightful review of research on Muslim beliefs around evolution, Carlisle, Hameed and Elsdon-Baker argue that “there is an entrenched assumption in PUS research that the rejection of evolutionary science by Muslims is a widespread problem resulting from these publics’ faith in Islam”; on the other hand, most studies are found to be “foregrounding an essentialized Islam; ignoring plurality and diversity across different societies; and ignoring the lived experiences of being Muslim”.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the framing of these survey questions is modelled on experiences of Christian movements, and can often neglect the issue of whether evolution is even salient in Muslim societies.<sup>10</sup> The study of Islam and science, thus, can present a particular conundrum- most sociological theories and postulations thus far have evolved from the study of Christianity’s relationship to science and “rational thought”. The structures of the Islamic tradition, however, vary considerably from those of Christianity: for example, the lack of a religious hierarchy, the differing pattern of mosque attendance as a measure of “religiosity”, the absence of a fractured history between state and religion, and even the lack of a “conflict thesis” framing more widely.

More recently, we have begun to see studies emerging that sit outside this “science vs. Christianity” framing, and address Muslim attitudes to evolution on their own terms. Increasingly reliable and nuanced data paints the picture of a complex and varied landscape when we examine Muslim views on evolution. With detailed studies emerging, for example, of the views of Muslim teachers, Muslim high schools, and Muslim physicians,<sup>11</sup> we are now beginning to see a clearer and more detailed picture of Muslim interaction with evolutionary science. One of the most influential and discerning recent studies in the field has been that of Amy Unsworth and David Voas,<sup>12</sup> exploring the effects of religious and educational variables on attitudes to evolution. Using more sensitive survey design, with open-ended questions and breaking down belief in evolutionary theory into different categories (animal, plant human), Unsworth and Voas collected

data in Muslim faith schools. Interestingly, they report that while Muslims tend to be more sceptical of evolution than most other religious groups, “the issue of evolution does not seem particularly salient for Muslims in Britain”,<sup>13</sup> and that “faith school attendance is associated with more acceptance of evolution for people belonging to groups that tend to reject it”.<sup>14</sup> Results such as these only underscore the fact that the debate is much more complex than initially assumed, and highlights the need for more detailed and nuanced study into Muslim beliefs around evolution.

None of the research above, however, looks at the role of Islamic seminary education and religious leadership in this debate, and the link between religious guidance and evolution scepticism in the case of Muslims. Why are Muslims more sceptical about evolution? Do Islamic knowledge and scriptural sources require a complete rejection of evolution? Have Muslim communities been guided by local Imams and scholars to shun evolutionary thought? Do Muslim religious leaders engage with debates on human creation, and, if so, what is the nature of these debates?

These are some of the questions that our research team had set out to answer through the “Science and the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge” project. We found the existence of global networks of scholarship discussing scientific theories around the origins of life and other “big questions”, community scholars guiding Muslim communities on the application of new scientific technologies, and very open attitudes within circles of learning towards tricky science vs. religion questions. Shoaib Malik’s ground-breaking manuscript is part of this story, the story of the opening up of Muslim thought and conversations around the previously contentious topic of evolution, and it is inadvertently also the story of a community’s response to the very real needs of its younger generations. Rather than locating the analysis within the framework of Christian fundamentalist groups (as mentioned above), Malik’s arguments sit firmly within, and respond directly to, the Islamic tradition.

We now turn to look more closely at the project, and particularly focus on what data has shown about the engagement of Muslim religious leaders in Britain with evolutionary science, before mapping our results onto Malik’s classification of Muslim beliefs around evolution.

## **Science and the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge: A New Study**

The STIK project (Science and British Muslim Religious Leadership - University of Birmingham, 2021–2023) was part of the “Science and Religion: Identity and Belief Formation” (Rice University and the University of California, San Diego) re-granting initiative which funded sociological research that empirically examines how identities and beliefs are related to science and religion. As one of 17 different research studies examining how science interacts with religion in society, this qualitative study investigated how science is understood, discussed and taught by Muslim religious leaders in Britain. From the outset, it aimed to address and document Islamic discourses about science on their own terms, and thus begin to build a clearer picture of the role of Islamic knowledge production in Muslim beliefs about science.

Over two years, the author and her colleagues at the University of Birmingham and Cardiff University have conducted 40 semi-structured interviews and 5 focus groups with British Muslim scholars and scholars-in-training. In addition, we visited and conducted fieldwork at 4 Islamic educational seminaries responsible for training future generations

of Muslim leaders. Within our research, we sought to cover the range of British Muslim sectarian traditions and ethnic groups; Deobandi, Barelwi, Shia, Salafi, and Ahmadi perspectives were sought within Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Arab and Turkish ethnic communities, amongst others. In addition, we reached a significant proportion of female scholars, with approximately 35% of our respondents being female, and one focus group consisting of entirely female students. Interestingly, a full 25% of our respondents were both Islamic scholars, and either had received mainstream education in a STEM field or were currently working as scientists; this was entirely incidental, as we did not set out to engage individuals with a clear connection to, or interest in, STEM fields.

Interview and focus group discussions conducted for the study followed an open-ended format and covered two broad themes, in addition to collecting details of personal and educational trajectories. The first set of guided conversations focussed on what we have called the “big questions”: evolution, the Big Bang, scriptural engagement with natural phenomena and even philosophies of modern science. Our second set of questions revolved around applied science topics: organ donation, COVID-19, climate change and gender identity debates. The selection of these topics reflected our understanding of topical science-related issues being discussed in Muslim communities. It is worth mentioning here that what emerged, rather unexpectedly, as a significant theme in this data were accounts of discrimination towards religious people working in professional STEM settings; this gives further weight to the assertion above that there exists a widespread public belief that religion and science are incompatible. However, our data on the subject of prejudice faced by Muslims (and other religious professionals) in STEM fields is limited at this point, and this represents a significant gap in sociological research. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, we focus only on data related to attitudes and beliefs around evolutionary science.

What we found as a result of this study was a rich, varied and burgeoning discourse around evolution, and the representation of a very wide range of views in our dataset. Significantly, we found that while in the past Muslim leaders and educational institutions have been hesitant to engage with evolutionary theories, this landscape is now changing. While we did still encounter uncertainty and indecision, this was, more importantly, accompanied by a willingness to openly discuss evolution. Much of this recent openness is driven by the concern of community-facing leaders, especially, for the challenges faced by young Muslims living in secular and openly atheistic environments.<sup>15</sup> Many of the challenges these young people face, we were told, are related to scientific discourses; more importantly, the Imams we spoke to felt ill-equipped to address complex scientific issues, including those that may be seen as pitting theological beliefs against modern scientific theories.

What we can say quite confidently is that to frame religious authority figures in Britain as actively driving anti-evolutionary perspectives is an overly simplistic perspective. In fact, we have documented how discussions of Islamic beliefs and modern evolutionary science are taking place more openly in leadership circles, in a complex manner often aimed at conciliation. While still restricted to internal community spaces, we see this as a positive and proactive move reflecting welcome changes in the direction of Islamic education and leadership in the UK.

Frequently, this change in mindset of religious leaders’ beliefs around evolution was credited to the work of newly emerging scholars such as Malik, within a global

network of Islamic scholars engaged in Islam and science debates. A prominent finding emerging from the STIK research is the observed existence of distinct networks of learning and transmission of scientific knowledge within circles of *Ulema* (scholars of Islam). These international networks are not just trans-Atlantic, but also involve scholars from the Muslim world: here in Britain, respondents quoted the discourses and arguments of Malay, Turkish, Indonesian and Gulf state scholars alongside the newer generation of traditional and Western trained American Islamic scholars.

This fluidity and fashioning of international networks is driven by need, and especially the need to address tricky scientific topics such as human evolution, assisted dying, organ donation and so forth. The development of these networks has been aided by an increased use of online spaces available to English-speaking audiences, especially in the past 2–3 years during the pandemic. This digital network has especially favoured the videos of charismatic scholars familiar with Western philosophies and epistemologies, and these scholars are able to bring the very “Muslim” challenges of topics such as evolution, organ donation and gender fluidity onto conversation with Islamic teachings.

It is within these global chains of knowledge transmission that Malik’s intervention can be firmly located.

### “Have you Heard of This guy Called ... Ustādh Shoaib?”

A lot of my engagement on this question has been through and because of Shoaib.  
(Senior male scholar, London)

It was within our conversations and fieldwork around evolution and philosophies of science that we most frequently came across references to “someone called *Ustādh* Shoaib”, as respondents would tentatively put it (*Ustādh* being a title of respect for a religious teacher). Before long, we began to realise the import of Shoaib Malik’s scholarship and outreach work, and the impact that he was having on global networks of knowledge transmission. Although he was (and is still) based in the Middle East, Malik is regularly part of both online and in-person conferences, seminars, school audiences and community events on either side of the Atlantic. His arguments have had a distinct role in opening up conversations in global Muslim communities around what was previously a subject that Muslim faith leaders avoided discussing publicly. In this paper, we focus on the particular ways in which we witnessed Malik’s work being instrumentalised and discussed in British Muslim communities of learning.

Interestingly, the most frequent and emphatic references to Malik’s work came from young scholars in training, particularly those attending what STIK colleagues referred to as “hybrid institutions”, rather than traditional madrassas (Islamic seminaries) established in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>16</sup> These bridging institutions represent a newer model of Islamic Higher Education institutions that have emerged over the last 20 years, in recognition of the need to equip graduates and curricula of traditional seminaries to meet the changing needs of British Muslims, and especially young Muslims. A pioneering institution in this regard, Ebrahim College was established in 2003 as “a Darul Uloom style seminary appropriate for the modern world”.<sup>17</sup> These institutions aim to equip the very graduates and scholars of the traditional system with a critical awareness of, and engagement with, contemporary issues. With respect to our research project, we found



these hybrid institutions very keen to participate and share their experiences and views, and actually very supportive of the need for social scientific research conducted in partnership with Muslim communities. We were told by an HE teacher at one such bridging institution that (in reference to his students encountering Malik's arguments):

I've had a lot of very positive feedback from students, especially those who are going to study biology or sciences ... I have a student that is studying now at Cambridge. He came up to me afterwards and he said to me "I really had lots of doubts. I had lots and lots of questions, but this has helped me a lot".

Within the pedagogical methods employed by these newer Islamic seminaries, we found that their focus on critical thinking and respectful yet curious questioning often stood out. As an occasional teacher at these newer institutions of learning, Malik's creative pedagogical methods and encouragement of open enquiry was appreciated by many students:

The way that he teaches is amazing. He presents all of the views and remains entirely quiet on his own views ... And I see him as somebody who is not going to influence my opinion. (He) would say, "Find this out for yourself. These are potential avenues you could go down or potential sources that you could use to look into it." (Female scholar-in-training)

In addition, there was a sense of almost palpable relief expressed by a number of mature scholars whom we spoke to, in recognition of the fact that Malik's engagement is addressing a gap that they themselves feel ill-equipped to tackle. A few also related stories of young Muslims questioning their faith and even "leaving the *dīn* (religion)" when they could not find answers to science-related questions, and especially questions around human evolution. A very senior scholar opened his conversation around evolution with the background that:

a lot of my engagement on this question has been through and because of Shoaib. I think that he has definitely opened up a discussion that has got people thinking and got scholars thinking. We're struggling with the fact that nobody talks about it.

Finally, we found that those students who had engaged directly with Malik's work found that it altered their understanding of the development of modern science significantly. Crucially, rather than changing their engagement with evidential science or with the scientific method, they spoke of how their knowledge of the history of modern science, and the philosophy of science, had been transformed completely on following Malik's arguments. As the author was told by a female scholar-in-training who reflected on her ignorance prior to encountering Malik's work, "I didn't even know there was a philosophy of science!"

On the topic of evolution specifically, a young male scholar-in-training related to us how Malik's arguments paved the way for him to resolve science versus religion conflicts that he had been struggling with since his teen years. While in the past this had led him to a veritable Jekyll and Hyde existence (inhabiting two exclusive worlds, the religious and the temporal) which led to a mental health breakdown, he shared how:

Studying with Shoaib Malik and seeing his work opened me up to different ways that this can be reconciled. Possibly there is a way in which evolution can be accepted that's consistent with the Islamic narrative as well. It's a really, really interesting argument.

We now turn to a brief illustration of how our data on beliefs around human evolution mapped onto Malik's typology of the four existing scholarly views within Muslim communities.

## Malik's Typology in Action

Malik's book opens with a perceptive and discerning overview of the current relationship between Islam and science, an overview borne of his many years of direct engagement with both religious and scientific communities. He paints an accurate picture of the "heterogenous" and sometimes fraught landscape of beliefs around evolution in Muslim communities, a characterisation that coincides with what we found in our study:

We very quickly see an emerging conflict of ideas leaving many Muslims to choose what may appear to be a binary choice, that of Islam or evolution, which in turn leads to sweeping statements and conclusions. Some will choose to reject or doubt the science of evolution because they deem the creation narrative provided by their Islamic teachings to be on firmer grounds. By contrast, some Muslims begin to question their commitments to Islam because they think science gives more robust answers... Others maintain their Muslim identity but find their own ways of reconciling Islam with evolution.<sup>18</sup>

After a lengthy discussion which gives the reader both the historical background and particular Christian response to evolution, Malik introduces a unique contribution in Ch.4 of *Islam and Evolution*: a 4-way classification of Muslim scholarly beliefs on evolutionary theory. Taking great care to avoid the pitfalls of previous classifications,<sup>19</sup> Malik has created a novel categorisation which we employed to help us identify the range of beliefs around evolution that we encountered in our research. These categories are:

- Creationism: "thinkers reject every entity being a part of evolutionary processes", and believe that all life was instantaneously create by God
- Human exceptionalism: "permits non-human evolution, but believes Adam (who in this position is considered the first human) and humanity is rejected as a product of evolution"
- Adamic exceptionalism: this is the idea that "non-humans and humans are a product of evolution, but only Adam is an exception to that process (which then entails that Adam is not considered to be the first human)"
- No exceptions: entailing a complete acceptance of modern evolutionary theory

A detailed exposition here of each view is beyond the scope of this article; however, the reader can find much explanation of the details of each viewpoint in the related chapter.

As discussed above, our research suggests strongly that Muslim leadership engagement with evolution is changing significantly; as such, we found examples of each of the positions that Malik describes, aside from creationism. Interestingly, across all denominations and age groups, we found that respondents were keen to distance themselves from anything that may be described as "creationism". Regardless of their views on human evolution, many respondents associated the creationist position with uniquely Christian teachings.

We did find variations of the three other positions within our dataset. On the category termed "human exceptionalism", evolutionary theory was sometimes simplified as a belief that humans "came from monkeys". Malik himself refers to this type of belief as highly emotive: "It is not uncommon – at least in my experience – for one to hear contemptuous retorts like: 'Do you think I come from a monkey?'"<sup>20</sup> This type of argument, for the consideration of human creation as unique, was fairly widespread in our data:

With the theory of evolution, personally, I believe that evolution is a thing but we didn't come from apes and stuff, we came from Adam. (Girls' focus group, Sunni Islamic educational institution, London)

The third of Malik's categories, "Adamic exceptionalism", was the position that the creation of both Adam and Eve was an exception to an otherwise evolutionary worldview. We found this position to be under consideration by a significant number of more experienced and learned scholars, especially those exposed to the arguments of Islamic scholars such as Khan and Qadhi,<sup>21</sup> Jalajel<sup>22</sup> and even Malik himself:

We know that *Hazrat* (a term of respect) Adam existed, and I believe he was the first man to exist. But in terms of ... Because evolution can have many parts after *Hazrat* Adam and before. (Student focus group, Sunni Islamic seminary, South England)

Finally, the final view of full acceptance of all aspects of evolutionary theory was less prevalent. We did, however, encounter this position as well:

Personally, I don't find it disturbing to have come from a line of, like, animal evolution ... I think the human exceptionalism is – I find that it kind of goes against my sensibilities of how I engage with other created beings. (Female Sunni Islamic scholar, Oxford)

Notwithstanding the examples above, we are keen to underline that the views we encountered did not map neatly into discrete categories. While typologies are useful tools for broad classifications, the picture on the ground that has emerged in our own research is significantly "messier" and difficult to classify into neat categories. In practice, Muslim leaders' beliefs, understanding of and even interest in both scientific and religious teachings related to evolution varied considerably, and even shifted with time.

Nevertheless, this typology represents an effort to tackle the issue theologically, taking Islamic tenets for given, and systematically with regards to Muslim scholarly positions on evolution. Herein lies the value of Malik's framework and of specific treatments like the classification discussed above. In the words of one of our more mature and experienced respondents (referring to the discourses initiated by Malik and his colleagues):

They created a space where it's possible for people to actually engage in the subject, rigorously, and come out the other end with their faith intact.

In view of our experience of studying, for over two years, the very communities that Malik addresses in his book, we would like to suggest that *Islam and Evolution: Al Ghazali and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* has made significant inroads in Muslim communities of learning and knowledge transmission for this very reason. By locating his analysis very firmly in a *Sunni Ash'ari* perspective, Malik has built trust, opened up minds to his arguments and allowed Muslims to engage with a previously-taboo topic "with their faith intact". Malik is very aware of the mistrust and polarities that exist; in his own words, he has taken a "dialogical approach". Early on in his book, we are told that:

Scientists expect the non-scientist to appreciate the nuances of the scientific discussions involved in this dialogue, and Muslim theologians expect the same consideration for the metaphysics and hermeneutics involved. Friction is generated when either side is made impotent and simplified to arrive at a predisposed conclusion. I don't believe that we can please everyone, but it goes a long way to understand where each person is coming from.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, sociological research has shown that Malik's work had indeed gone "a long way" towards encouraging nuance, reconsideration and realignment in the discourses of Islam and evolution; we have every reason to believe that it will continue to inform and engage Muslim leadership circles in the future.

### Some Concluding Words

This paper has introduced the reader to the development of discourses around Islam and science over the last two decades. We have seen how the sociological study of Islam and science has developed in this period to become significantly more open, nuanced and evidence-based, countering what was a caricatured and maligned association in the recent past; in Malik's own words, "the discussion has undoubtedly started to mature, and a spectrum is very visibly developing".<sup>24</sup> Amongst such studies is the "Science and Transmission of Islamic Knowledge" (2021–2023) research project undertaken by the author and her colleagues; this is the first detailed and purposeful study of the views and engagement of Muslim religious leaders in Britain with scientific topics. Having set the scene, the latter parts of this paper detail the unique position of Dr. Shoaib Malik's book *Islam and Science: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* within this nascent discussion in Muslim leadership circles of learning. As a way of directly highlighting and evidencing the value of this book, the typology that it had developed and the very effective community engagement that Malik pursues, the author has been privileged to share primary research data in which direct references were made to Malik or his arguments. Most importantly, the research team has reported that, in contrast to where the discussion was two decades ago, "there is a widely felt need to enable conversations about evolution in Islamic seminaries".<sup>25</sup>

It is within this nexus that the book *Islam and Science: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* sits, as an intervention that has contributed much to the discussion. On the one hand, it has succeeded in reducing polarity between worldviews, ideologies and oppositional camps in the Islam and science debate by locating its main thesis within a *Sunni Ash'ari* theology, and showing possibilities for conciliation. In addition, it has also done so systematically, while at the same time putting forward a very large amount of complex information on the subject in a readable format, allowing the reader to reach their own conclusions.

In the spirit of looking ahead to future possibilities, our research shows the need for the arguments that Malik raises to now be disseminated more widely in British Muslim communities. While he is undertaking a lot of this work already, online and in-person through community settings, in order to encourage extremely busy ulema to engage with his work, Malik may want to consider producing brief booklets/blogposts/easily accessible articles to inform Islamic scholars and spread the arguments of his book more widely. We found that while many of the scholars with whom we spoke had heard of Malik and his work, they had not engaged with his book directly, and were far more likely to have come across and used social media material. While online outputs do perform a valuable function, they cannot replace the depth, nuance and sheer weight of scholarship that is found in Dr. Shoaib Malik's *Islam and Science: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm*.

It has been an honour and a privilege to be able to offer a response to the book, and to contribute to this special edition of *Theology and Science*. In his closing words, Malik reveals his hopes for the book: "If I have been able to help systematise the discourse

and clarify any misconceptions, I consider this to be a major milestone in the ongoing conversation of Islam and evolution”.<sup>26</sup> Based on the author’s experience of extended research within the very communities at which this book is aimed, it can be concluded without doubt that Malik’s work continues to both systemise knowledge and clarify polarised understandings within the Islam and evolution discussion.

## Notes

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