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## Interviews

January 21, 2013

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# Interview: Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy on Science, Religion and Politics

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Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy needs no introduction to Pakistanis and non Pakistanis alike. Eminent Pakistani physicist and activist, Professor Hoodbhoy wages a lone battle for secularism, rationalism and skepticism in Pakistan. He is also author of the books: *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality* and *Education and the State Fifty Years of Pakistan*.

We are proud to have him here on Rational Hub, and congratulate him on his recent appointment as the member of Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters in U.N.

### **1. What would you say, is the root cause of today's rampant anti-intellectualism and anti-science mentality?**

Irrationality and opposition to science have always spread through those who profit from exploiting human fears of the unknown. The religious ones spread terror with their terrible threats of eternal hell, and unlimited suffering if we deviate from some imagined true path. Today the vendors of spiritual bliss are doing roaring business, preying upon weak minds and spirits, and dwelling upon the fear of death and the unknown. They reject scientifically valid theories such as biological evolution, and battle to limit research and inquiry into nature. Such people should have gone with the dinosaurs but for multiple reasons this has not happened. You see them everywhere, but in my country there are perhaps more of them than elsewhere.

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spite of this, as well as rampant poverty and illiteracy, Pakistan could still have moved in a progressive, secular direction.

## **2. Why is religious extremism so rampant in Pakistan, in your view?**

I don't think that there is just one single reason. Think of a bomb. To make one you need the explosive, oxidizer, trigger, shell, etc. None of these alone can do the job. The same goes for religious extremism in Pakistan. One ingredient is to be found in the country's genesis. Pakistan was brought into being on the slogan that Muslims simply cannot live alongside Hindus. This wove religion into the national fabric. But, in spite of this, as well as rampant poverty and illiteracy, Pakistan could still have moved in a progressive, secular direction. This appeared to be happening in the first couple of decades after independence but then other factors kicked in. In the 1980's, all progressive trends were reversed after Pakistan and the United States created an international jihad consortium for fighting against the Soviet Union. Religion was pushed down people's throats in Afghanistan and Pakistan, education was drastically changed and fashioned into a propaganda tool, and the mass media became a means for indoctrination. This strategy created the infrastructure for fashioning the mujahideen into a force that ultimately defeated the Soviets. But it also created the fanatics who later attacked their former masters, both American and Pakistani.



Professor Hoodbhoy at the Aga Khan University (Photo: The Express Tribune)

## **3. Is there an inherent incompatibility between science and religion, as religion often make scientific claims? Is it realistic to expect religion to be divorced from scientific inquiry entirely?**

Studying religion will not bring any one closer to scientific truth. I know of no religious text – Torah, Bible, or Quran – that provides the basis of a scientific theory or experiment, or that has led to the making of a machine or a piece of scientific equipment. The greater the distance we put between science and religion, the better. Religion is fine if limited to those “large questions” about which science has nothing to say: the purpose of human life, the question of whether the universe has a creator and what his game is, etc. But when religion makes claims about the physical universe and invokes miraculous happenings, then the clash with science is almost certain. Science firmly rejects miracles, which necessarily assume the suspension of physical law.

## **4. Was quite disturbed to see the dishonesty shown by Hamza Tzortzis in your recent debate against him, and I am glad that you didn't engage him anymore.**

When some LUMS students asked me to debate Tzortsis, I hadn't heard of the man but agreed to a discussion on religion and rationality. Later I learned that he's a Greek convert to Islam and a professional proselytizer. Anyhow, in this first – and last – encounter with him, I discovered that the man was a glib talker but didn't know what he was talking about. He used some big words, invoking Einstein's general relativity, M-theory, Stephen Hawking, black holes, etc. He bandied these things around and used them to make sweeping statements about Islam, science, and philosophy. So, to make sure we were talking about the same thing, I asked him to explain what exactly general relativity and M-theory were about. But, being a psychology graduate, he could not do that. Now that he stood exposed before the audience, he lost his temper and accused me of being anti-Islam and anti-Muslim. I could not take such nonsense, and decided there was no point in debating a dangerous charlatan.

Basic scientific principles are memorized beautifully, just as religious verses are. But the scientific method has not been internalized by most of those who teach or learn science in Pakistan's colleges and universities.

**5. Have you looked into the whole Kalam Cosmological Argument? Does it have any merit at all, from a scientific perspective?**

I am sure it has some interest for those who study history and, in particular, the history of thought. The Kalam Cosmological Argument argues for a prime mover – God – and says that He is the first cause from which all others are derived. It's basically a theistic point of view and provides some kind of a rationale for the existence of the world. People in old times had some quaint ideas of our cosmic origins – such as believing that the earth was placed on the back of a giant turtle – and they are always fun to read about. But Kalam is utterly irrelevant to anything connected to modern cosmology, which is based on equations and observations.

**6. Now speaking of something you've been vocally critical of – Agha Waqar Ahmed's water-kit. Sure, the whole thing was silly and downright ridiculous, but it was quite surprising to see how this was endorsed by authorities and even scientists in Pakistan. Now you can understand how some lay people fall for such scams, due to their lack of skepticism. But it's quite appalling to think this was supported by some scientists and authorities, isn't it? What, in your opinion, is the reason for such lack of skepticism, even among scientists?**

Basic scientific principles are memorized beautifully, just as religious verses are. But the scientific method has not been internalized by most of those who teach or learn science in Pakistan's colleges and universities. Yes, it was quite amusing to see our two most celebrated nuclear heroes, Dr. A.Q. Khan and Dr. Samar Mubarakmand, make fools of themselves by supporting a scam artist. The guy claimed that he could make a car run on plain water as fuel by electrolyzing the water. One did not have to be a scientist to know that it was nonsense. If such a thing was possible, then the rest of the world would have done it a long time ago.

**7. How rampant is populism in Pakistani politics? And how has the general populace contributed to that?**

We have two angry messiahs. One is a man called Tahir-ul-Qadri, a Canadian citizen and mullah who mysteriously parachuted into Pakistani politics and led 25,000 people in a march to occupy Islamabad. The second is Imran Khan, a cricketer with right-wing views who supports the Taliban in just about

everything they do. Both are men of fine oratory – the former being more gifted. They promise to kick wicked leaders out of government, reward the righteous, and deliver a new Pakistan. Before a coup-plagued nation that has spent many decades under military rule, they preach to adulating under-30 crowds about the corruption of the present rulers. But neither dares to touch Pakistan's real issues. Both are careful to castigate only the corruption of civilians; there is nary a word about the others.

**8. Could you tell us a bit about the relationship between Prof. Abdus Salam, yourself and Prof. Weinberg?**

Abdus Salam and Steven Weinberg are stellar scientists who won the Nobel Prize in 1979 for unifying the weak and electromagnetic forces. I took a course in quantum mechanics from Weinberg at MIT in 1973. He and I have subsequently been in communication over the years and I am awed by the amount of physics he knows, and his clear-headedness. I knew Salam much better, although our principal interaction was on matters of religion, science, and politics rather than physics. He wrote the preface to my book on Islam and science, and we co-authored an article as well elsewhere. We agreed to disagree on some things – he was totally enamored with Islam. Sadly, he is considered a heretic by most Muslims because of certain doctrinal differences with mainstream Islam.

**9. A personal question, if you don't mind, why did you return to Pakistan after your doctorate at MIT? Did you ever regret your decision?**

In the 1970's, people like me had hoped to be agents of positive change, and that's why we returned. I have never regretted it, but things in Pakistan haven't got better. In fact the trend is towards more injustice, skewed income distributions, and religious fanaticism. It's clear that there are no quick fixes to our problems and that the struggle is going to be long and hard.

**10. Your contract with LUMS ended in December, and has not been renewed without offering any valid reasons. Why do you suspect this is due to their ideological or political bias?**

The university administration refused to listen to the 1000 students and faculty who petitioned the administration to renew my contract, as well as all members of the physics department – with the significant exception of the chairman. So the reason for getting rid of me does not seem to be an academic one. What exactly it was remains a mystery to me. They won't say what it is, although the dean accused me of attempting to "fix the world". I guess they don't like how I think about things.

**11. Do you think your vocal criticism of Islamists might probably make your search for another job way harder despite your reputation as a physicist, in Pakistan? Are you planning to move abroad by any chance?**

That's precisely the reason, but since I am not running for president it doesn't bother me. I'm not moving out of Pakistan. I've invested too much of my life here, and there's too much that remains to be done. Getting another university job looks difficult but I haven't lost hope. Let's see.

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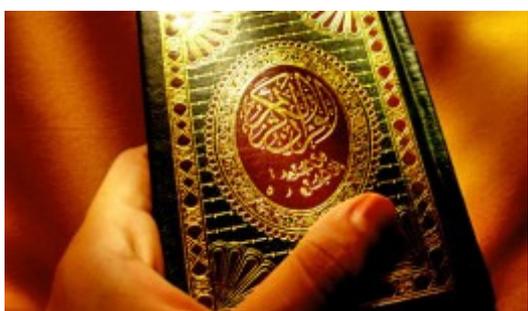
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1. Ahmed Ali

I love his views...!



We Need more People like him in Pakistan...

Reply

January 21, 2013 at 10:02 pm



2. Syed Rizvi

I am glad he got his new job with the UN. His efforts will be of value to the world community—not to the Pakisatni community.

Reply

January 22, 2013 at 4:54 am



3. Syed Aulad Uddin Shah

My pleasure for your new job With UN. Unfortunately we need extremists no need Scientists. Therefore we are going backward instead upward.

Reply

January 22, 2013 at 6:22 pm



4.

Faraz Kakar

Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy: You are a great source of hope and inspiration for us. Your appointment as a disarmament matters advisor is an honour for the United Nations. I wish you best of luck for this assignment.

Reply

January 22, 2013 at 7:34 pm



5. Syed Naim Naqvi

I wish there are more people in the Islamic world like Dr Pervez Hoosbhoy.

Reply

January 23, 2013 at 5:34 am

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