

An Interview with Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy

By Mustafa Qadri

For three decades Pervez Hoodbhoy, a Professor of Particle Physics at Qaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, has been promoting science and humanism in Pakistan. He was one of the earliest voices to sound the alarm not only against the Pakistan Taliban movement but also against the perils of developing nuclear weapons and the deepening religious intolerance that has been aided in large part by the Pakistan state. In this fascinating and insightful encounter, journalist Mustafa Qadri speaks with Professor Hoodbhoy about science, Islam, and the challenges faced by Pakistan.

MQ: There is a tendency in Muslim communities to look at past advancements in science by Muslim societies. In Pakistan, the development of the nuclear bomb was hailed as a marvel of modern Islamic science. What do you think is the relationship between Islam and science today?

PH: Well, of course theological inquiry has nothing to do with the physical sciences today and it can provide no guidance in my opinion. Theology relates to an entirely different set of issues. It has to do with how humans perceive their role in the universe, what is right, what is wrong, what is the purpose of life, and so forth. Whereas natural science has a very defined purpose; which is to understand the workings of the natural universe. And I'm afraid that religion, any religion, no longer has anything to say about how we should investigate nature, what we expect to find.

MQ: There have been a slew of books by authors like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and a number of others talking about atheism and trying to distance society and the way it is governed by religion. Is that barking up the wrong tree? Does science have a role to play in social policies?

PH: No, I don't see that. I see that our ethical and moral principles are perhaps defined by the species instinct within us to propagate us and to become more

evolutionarily capable. However, the relation between morality, ethics and science is a distant one. I see that there are some things in society that we can ascribe to the need for us to survive... But other things, I think, are built on human experience and there does not seem to be a clear link between what is in existence in the field of morals and ethics and between science and rationalism.

MQ: But you don't think morality and ethics should temper society? We've just witnessed the 20th century where science has given us nuclear weapons and more efficient ways to kill people.

PH: I think anyone who says we should just let science do whatever it can has a very dangerous belief. Science must be tempered by human principles. I do think humanism does offer that way out. Because if one accepts the principles of humanism, that we are all equal, and that wisdom is to be obtained through experience and that science and logic are essential tools by which we can understand not just the physical world but the functioning of our societies, and that there is no place in this world anymore for superstitions and for things that have been worshipped in the past. I think in that sense scientific humanism does provide a means by which to temper the excesses of science and tell us that some things are absolutely wrong. Take nuclear weapons, it's obvious that if we condone their use, this world is going to be a very unhappy place... and it may not exist for very long.

MQ: In a deeply religious country like Pakistan how does one apply that humanism? Is it inevitable that someone promoting it will have to invoke Islam?

PH: Well, nuclear weapons have become a symbol of defiance for Pakistanis for two reasons. One the bomb has been associated with Islam as a means of increasing its glory. And the second reason is that it is associated with Pakistan in a nationalistic way which is... no different from India or perhaps what it was like in the United States when it first developed nuclear weapons or other nations. Nuclear weapons are a symbol of national pride in all countries. At the time of the nuclear tests religious parties took out cardboard replicas of the bomb, paraded them on the street with placards saying Islamic bomb and verses of the Koran.

MQ: So going back to humanism, that seems to be a departure from universal humanist principles. How does one recover the ground lost to this kind of mindset?

PH: Well, it's not just in Pakistan, you find it in every part of the world humanistic principles are a second priority. Even if they are admitted as theoretically good... nationalism and 'my country right or wrong' often dominates. It dominates to the extent that the US even today, when they talk about casualties in Afghanistan or Iraq, they say 4000 American lives have been lost. How often do you see American newspapers mentioning 500,000 Iraqis have been killed? So you see this attachment to one's own, this 'us and them' is very pervasive and it's very hard to fight. But it must be fought. And in places it has been successfully fought. After all the anti-war movement [against the Iraq war] in the US and Europe was really an expression. It's not that Europeans were worried about their own being killed. That was a factor but the biggest factor was that here was a large army going overseas to kill [people in] a country that had no capacity to hurt the US or Europe. Let's go even further back to the anti-Vietnam war movement. That was an expression of idealism and humanism and the feeling hasn't disappeared [but] it has to be cultivated and increased.

MQ: Is there a comparator to all of that in the Muslim world? You've mentioned, for example, the reluctance often to condemn the Taliban in Pakistan.

PH: There has been a reluctance to condemn the Taliban, Al Qaeda for all the atrocities that have been committed and justifications instead have been sought... that who else is opposing the Americans? The US is an imperial power and... somebody has to fight them. You see this confusion even among people in the Left in Muslim countries and in fact even among Hindus in India who belong to the Left who say someone has to oppose the US. So the fact that the US has been such a dreadful imperial power has confused people and made them look away from the fact that the Taliban are barbaric beyond any kind of calculation.

MQ: And all the people they are killing are ordinary Muslim Pakistanis.

PH: Absolutely, ordinary Muslim Pakistanis. And so now I think perhaps the tide is beginning to turn. You can see that there is something wrong in killing doctors merely for trying to inoculate young children from polio? [The Taliban oppose vaccinations which they see as a ploy by foreign powers to sterilise the population]

MQ: Is there a chance for some sort of humanist movement?

PH: In the long term, yes [but] I think that Muslim countries are in a confused psychological state. On the one hand they are dependent on the West for everything. Even the Taliban, they use cell phones, they travel in pickups, their lives are now

increasingly defined by the technology that they have available to them. They have no part in the making of that technology.

MQ: But they're happy to use it?

PH: Oh yeah, they're happy to use it. Incidentally, this is different from previous eras where you had opposition to technology. For example, the loud speaker. When it was first used in mosques sixty to seventy years ago, there was an uproar because here was something that had 'probably' been invented by Jews. How could it find its place in mosques? There was opposition to the printing press, so seventy years ago in Turkey it was banned and it had also been banned a century earlier in Baghdad [in what is now modern day Iraq]. All of these were seen as innovations that would cheapen the value of religion.

MQ: I'm wondering about the Taliban. When in control of Afghanistan, they didn't use any electronic media. Now they are using mobile phones, have spokespersons and produce videos.

PH: They have become increasingly more sophisticated in how they propagate their messages. So for example although in the strictest form of Islam it is forbidden to have a human face depicted in any way. Well now they show their victims' full face and then cut off their heads. The videos they produce now are fairly slick. They are filmed with excellent cameras and edited with electronic software and they have become very savvy at using the media so it's not just night letters as it used to be. Now with the night letter comes a dvd.

MQ: Now, let's move to the broader picture. What is at the root of the current violence occurring in the name of Islam?

PH: It's different in different places. If you look at [Muslim extremists in] the West it's an assertion of identity and they nurse each other's grievances. A lot of them are underperformers and so there is an attempt to lay the problems of their community on others. So you blame the other for what is actually your own lack of opportunity or ability...

MQ: So coupled with that do you think America's actions around the world have assisted that, given them a ready excuse?

PH: Well, I wouldn't even call it an excuse. I'd call it a reason. So many things come together. It's like a bomb. You've got to have the explosive, the oxidiser, all the right chemicals. They've all got to come together at the right time for the bomb to explode. None of this by itself is enough to cause an explosion. So if you look at poverty, there has been poverty in the northwest tribal areas of Pakistan, and guns, for as long as anyone can remember. Then you have the history of the Americans coming in and launching their global jihad. But there's one other thing and that's I think at the base of it all practically everywhere in the world and that's the fact that the world has moved much too fast for anyone's comfort and we just haven't been able to come to any equilibrium. Look, the lives of our parents are totally different to our lives today and that is true practically everywhere. And then you look at the tribal areas. Until 30-40 years ago they were living the lives of their fathers, their grandfathers and their great grandfathers. No difference. And then comes something very important in the 1970s – migration, to Saudi Arabia and the Middle East where they get the opportunity to dig ditches, clean toilets, very menial jobs. They come back with money and the technology it can buy, like pickup trucks, now cell phones, and so forth. That starts changing the face of the region. Over time it changes the structure of society. Traditional lives have been disrupted. This is a change that is more cataclysmic than what you saw at the time of the industrial revolution in Europe.

MQ: And why is that, is that because of the rate of change?

PH: Yes, the rate of change then was slower. Just look at the impact that population growth has had. Pakistan's population at partition in 1947 was 28 million, West Pakistan. Today it's 170 million so for every person that existed then there are six now. In cities there is a totally different way of living. They are mega slums. What can grow in that? Violence.

MQ: So really while we can look at a certain particular date when the current violence started what you're saying is it goes back to partition?

PH: Well, yes back to partition in terms of the religious intolerance that led to the creation of Pakistan... the notion that Hindus and Muslims could not live together, but that Muslims could live together. Well, the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 [after mass oppression by West Pakistan forces] proved that wrong. Religion is always divided [and Islam] has been divided for the last 1400 years.

MQ: From the very beginning?

PH: From the very beginning.

MQ: Do you think part of the problem is that there's a tendency to use the Islam stamp on everything? So for example when we talk about scientists from the 14th century, why do we categorise them as Muslim scientists?

PH: Religion is inserted where it absolutely has no place. For example, if you go to [the university medical] clinic here in Islamabad you'll find big posters that say 'cleanliness is half of religion'. Well hang on, if that's the case then why is this hospital so dirty? Or at the start of tree planting week they say it's your Islamic duty to plant a tree. But the rate of deforestation [in Pakistan] is greater than most countries in the world!

MQ: Doesn't that just mean we've been bad Muslims?

PH: So, then it is said that Islam is good, Muslims are bad. That's the defence that is taken. There's a mythologised version of the religion which has never been practised except in the early days of Islam. If we go back to that early Islam everything will be ok. The problem with this is that it bypasses 1400 years of human progress. After all, people don't travel by horses or camels, don't own slaves or have the kind of tribal feuds they had in those days. We've learnt to outgrow miracles. Instead we see science doing things we could never have imagined. And so this dogged determination to look for all answers in the past and to imagine that all answers exist in the Koran... is very destructive of progress and of science. Because the fact is a lot of Muslims are looking to the Koran as the place to find answers to scientific problems. If you go to the internet you'll see thousands of websites that say that the Koran predicted black holes and quantum mechanics and penicillin and antibiotics... in fact no discovery has not been predicted by the Koran. It's rubbish.

MQ: In a country like Pakistan then how do you tackle these issues?

PH: Look, you tell people live your life, do what you want. Just keep religion out of politics, let it be a personal matter... In my mind the only way for Pakistan to move forward is for it to become secular... which means that people have the right to worship whatever they like and by whatever means. But no one has the right to impose their version of Islam on all of us.