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The Link between Coronavirus and Darwin according to Pervez Hoodbhoy: A Critical Response*

Osman Bakar**

Abstract: This paper provides a critical response to Pervez Hoodbhoy's article that first appeared in *Dawn*, Pakistan's leading newspaper in April 2020. Hoodbhoy, a well-known physicist in the country and a former associate of the Nobel laureate Abdus Salam, titled the article 'Corona – Our Debt to Darwin.' The article's main contention is that coronavirus reaffirms the truth of Darwin's theory of organic evolution by means of natural selection that emphasises random variation and survival of the fittest as its main tenets. Hoodbhoy fully embraces this theory leading him to adopt a confrontational ideological position against religion. He also contends that Darwin's natural selection is the key to unravelling the mysteries of coronavirus and to success in delivering the needed vaccines. This paper seeks to rebut both of Hoodbhoy's contentions through arguments drawn from several disciplines, especially history and philosophy of science, evolutionary biology, theology, and traditional medicine. It argues that the contentions are premised on two main assumptions that are weak and questionable. First, Darwinian natural selection has always been central to evolutionary biology. Second, biology has well established knowledge about viruses, particularly coronavirus. This paper shows that the two assumptions are not supported by contemporary knowledge in biology. It argues that Hoodbhoy's contentions are more motivated by his sectarian evolutionist ideology than by scientific considerations.

* This is a revised version of the author's response which was published on <https://flagship.iium.edu.my/eps/covid-19-and-darwin-a-response-to-pervez-hoodbhoy/> under the title "Covid-19 and Darwin: A response to Pervez Hoodbhoy."

** Distinguished Professor, Holder of Al-Ghazali Chair of Islamic Thought, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, International Islamic University Malaysia (ISTAC-IIUM). Email: obbakar@yahoo.com; osmanbakar@iium.edu.my

Keywords: Evolutionary theory, natural selection, coronavirus, tradition, rationalism.

Abstrak: Kertas ini menghadirkan sebuah kritikan ilmiah terhadap makalah Pervez Hoodbhoy yang diterbitkan dalam *Dawn*, akhbar terkemuka Pakistan pada bulan April 2020. Hoodbhoy yang terkenal di negara itu sebagai ahli fizik dan yang pernah menjadi rakan penyelidik kepada Abdus Salam, pemenang Hadiah Nobel, menjudulkan makalahnya ‘Corona – Hutang Dunia Dengan Darwin.’ Pendapat utama yang dimajukan oleh makalah ini ialah bahawa coronavirus sesungguhnya mengesahkan kebenaran teori Darwin tentang evolusi organis menerusi pemilihan semulajadi yang menegaskan variasi secara rawak dan kelangsungan hidup bagi yang paling berkelebihan sebagai idea kuncinya. Hoodbhoy menerima sepenuhnya teori ini yang telah mendorongnya untuk mengambil pendirian ideologi yang berkonfrontasi terhadap agama. Beliau juga berpendapat bahawa pemilihan semulajadi menurut Darwin adalah kunci kepada terbongkarnya misteri coronavirus dan juga kunci kepada kejayaan menghasilkan vaksin yang diperlukan. Kertas ini bertujuan untuk menyanggah pendapat-pendapat Hoodbhoy ini dengan hujah-hujah yang berasaskan ilmu daripada beberapa disiplin ilmu terutamanya sejarah dan falsafah sains, biologi evolusi, teologi dan perubatan tradisional. Ia menghujahkan bahawa pendapat-pendapat tersebut didasarkan kepada dua andaian utama yang sebenarnya adalah lemah dan boleh dipertikaikan. Pertama, pemilihan semulajadi menurut Darwin adalah idea teras kepada biologi evolusi sepanjang sejarahnya. Kedua, biologi mempunyai pengetahuan yang jelas tentang virus, khususnya coronavirus. Kertas ini menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua andaian tidak mendapat dukungan ilmiah daripada biologi semasa. Ia juga menghujahkan bahawa sebenarnya pendapat-pendapat Hoodbhoy lebih banyak dipengaruhi oleh ideologi evolusinya yang bersifat kepuakan daripada dipengaruhi oleh pertimbangan-pertimbangan saintifik.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Teori evolusi, pemilihan semulajadi, coronavirus, agama dan rasionalisme

Introduction: Corona Literature Explosion

Ever since the novel coronavirus-generated disease called covid-19 became global news late last year, countless views and comments have appeared in the world’s print and electronic media on various aspects of the pandemic and its impact on the contemporary social order both at national and global levels. There is an almost endless supply of news each day on the pandemic and related issues that would make it difficult for anyone to keep track of each one of them. My simple wish

is that, during this historic period of home confinement imposed on us by the pandemic when free time is in relative abundance, I would come across enough interesting articles to read to enable me to be educated on the subject. Thankfully, from time to time, I have been receiving from several friends really thoughtful articles on coronavirus and the diseases it has generated, particularly COVID-19, which I don't think I would have found on my own. Perusing them has benefited me intellectually. These friends have shared the articles with me without expecting something in return. In the past but on different subject matters, I used to receive articles from friends accompanied with requests for my written responses. But it was not until April 2020 that I received the first corona article whose sender was soliciting a written response from me. The article in question is now the subject of my present discussion.

Pervez Hoodbhoy's Corona Article

In the article Pervez Hoodbhoy is only introduced as a physics teacher in Lahore and Islamabad. This is probably because in Pakistan, his native country, he needs no introduction, since he is a rather well-known figure as a scientist and intellectual-activist, albeit a controversial one. But outside Pakistan, particularly in developing countries like Malaysia, not many people may know him except among certain intellectual and academic circles. So, it is only proper to highlight a few things about him. He is someone whose ideas were known to the author of this paper quite a bit, although these ideas are largely based on his book *Islam and Science* published decades ago (1991). The book was prefaced by Abdus Salam, his fellow countryman, who shared the 1979 Nobel Prize winner for Physics. Many people, like the author of this article, were curious to read the book largely because of Abdus Salam's preface. Hoodbhoy's thought pattern as displayed in the book has left a lasting impression on the mind of this author. The book displayed plenty of fiery rationalism. Among Muslim intellectuals worldwide, Hoodbhoy is largely known thanks to this book. A leading nuclear physicist with a PhD from the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), he has been associated in his past scientific research with Abdus Salam. He has lectured widely in and outside Pakistan, and also received several prestigious international awards. His intellectual activism is said to be mainly influenced by his philosophical understanding of secularism, rationalism, and liberalism. This is the man whose corona article we are

now discussing. As the author has not kept abreast with his more recent writings, it would be interesting to find out if Hoodbhoy's key ideas and intellectual perspectives that the author first encountered in the book are still central to his epistemological thought or have undergone significant changes or revisions.

Sadly, after reading the corona article, the author could only come to this unwelcome and, in a sense, pitiful conclusion! It is just like reading the same old script from the author on the theme of encounter between religion and science. His ideological and philosophical positions that came out clearly in *Islam and Science* find reaffirmation in the article. What these positions are will be discussed later in greater details. The only thing new in the article is the discussion on coronavirus and what its author perceives as obstacles to the fight against the pandemic. But even in this specific discussion on coronavirus the apparent objective is to bolster his ideological position rather than to provide, for example, new insights into the ecological roots of the pandemic and to initiate new discourses on the significance of medical pluralism for the contemporary world and the future of humanity. By medical pluralism the author means the philosophical belief in the idea of the plurality and diversity of medical and health systems that are based on different conceptions of the human body and different approaches to health and diseases. The world needs many medical and health systems, since no single system could claim to have remedial and therapeutic monopoly in the sense that it alone is sufficient to cater to the health needs of humanity (Bakar, 1997).

In Hoodbhoy's article coronavirus is featured as just another supporting evidence of Darwin's natural selection and its assumed indispensability to contemporary biology as well as another instance of the irrelevance of traditional medicine to modern diseases. Apart from harping on the issue of the confrontation between science and religion, Hoodbhoy has hardly changed in another respect, that is, his polemical style of discourse. The article is polemical from beginning to end, and he seems to have succeeded in antagonising almost everyone mentioned in it. It would be a tough challenge for the author to write a response to what is essentially a polemic!

When the word 'pitiful' is used in describing what one thinks of the article, the mind is directed to two related things. One is Hoodbhoy's

tradition bashing and the other, his seemingly mixed feelings of hope and despair about the outcome of the conflict between science and tradition that could be confusing to readers. His tradition bashing in the article shows that his quarrels with religion that is clearly observed in *Islam and Science* have not abated. Thus one is reminded of a pertinent comment on him by Imad A. Ahmed (1993), an American scientist, in his review of the book. While acknowledging Hoodbhoy's scientific credentials, Imad Ahmed has this to say about him: "Regrettably, he fails to appreciate the understanding of the relationship of science to religion that is emerging in the reconstructionist wing of the Islamic revival. This puts limits on this otherwise outstanding book. The tragedy is that these limits may cause the book to be quickly dismissed by the people who would benefit the most from it – Muslims in the Arab world and elsewhere feeling challenged by Western culture who need to understand the *universality* of science" (Ahmed, 1993, p. 133). Ahmed wrote this comment three decades ago. In the comment he raised the important issue of the relevance of religion to any attempt aimed at advancing the cause of science in Muslim societies. Thus, while lauding Hoodbhoy's "thought experiment" on the creation of a universal scientific culture in the contemporary Muslim world, particularly in Pakistan, the worthiness of which no Muslim would disagree, Ahmed also saw then its major shortcoming. This is Hoodbhoy's lack of a sound understanding of the relationship of science to religion in the Muslim context. The corona article is good evidence that Ahmed's constructive criticism was not heeded. Hoodbhoy is not interested in coming to terms with religion or tradition. This is a pity, since Islam's treasury of universal teachings on knowledge and civilisational experience in scientific pursuits is sufficiently rich to cater to the needs of contemporary Muslims, including scientists, who are searching for guidelines on how to reconstruct a veritable universal scientific culture that would really benefit the whole of humanity. Hoodbhoy's blanket denunciation of tradition as anti-scientific, in the article and in the book, is without any scientific basis whatsoever, and certainly it would not help the search for these guidelines.

Given his blanket denunciation of tradition, which unfortunately he believes is for the sake of science, it is understandable if from time to time he would try to provide an assessment update on where science stands in its conflict with tradition. Interestingly, he has the ingenuity to

seize the current issue of coronavirus as an opportune occasion to present his assessment, since he sees the pandemic as a golden opportunity to highlight what science can do and tradition cannot do to overcome the challenge, even if the anticipated vaccines are not yet in sight. But, despite his faith in the eventual victory of science over tradition, he is also unsure about the latter's strength. His assessment update in the corona article seems to be conveying contradictory messages. Thus, he appears on the one hand to be in despair at seeing religious and political leaders joining forces in their opposition to science. On the other hand, he appears optimistic that science will come out as the winner in this conflict. But after all these decades of waging a "battle for rationality," to borrow from the title of his previously cited book, the best positive update on the battle that he could give is this: "Now the good news: most educated people are *beginning to understand* (italics mine) why scientific approaches work and unscientific ones don't" (Hoodbhoy, 2020).

But for him to say, as in the quote, that thanks to coronavirus even educated people are only beginning to understand the miracle of scientific power, it could only be interpreted to mean that in reality he has hollow optimism about science replacing tradition. The serious implication of his assessment update is that the opposition of tradition to science, particularly in Pakistan, may be viewed as being so strong that all this while, hardly any progress has been made by the latter. It cannot be said with certainty if he is fully aware of the implication of his saying. Moreover, although he believes that only science could find real answers to coronavirus, both biological and medical, these answers still belong to the realm of the future, and are thus still matters of hope! There is a serious flaw in the line of his argument in the article when he tries to solely base his optimism in question on the future success of science in dealing with coronavirus. How could he argue for the eventual replacement of tradition by science when, as he puts it, the former is still strong and science itself is yet to demonstrate its miraculous power over coronavirus on which he is banking so much for the anticipated replacement?

But even if science were to succeed in overcoming the coronavirus challenge, it would be wishful thinking on his part to expect tradition founded on religion to disappear or decline overnight on account of this factor alone. He should be honest enough to admit that tradition

is a civilisational force that has proved to be more resilient than even science. Tradition is founded on principles that are different from those of modern science, and it is known to have its own inner strength. Moreover, it is not monolithic as some people think. There are many different traditional voices, some of which are not only pro-science and pro-dialogue but also with the intellectual ability to contribute meaningful ideas to the scientific renaissance in contemporary Islam. To many people, including this author, the choice open to humanity in this science-tradition conflict is not to go either just for one or the other in an exclusive manner, but rather to go for their complementary roles and functions. Humanity needs both of them as two fundamental interactive sectors of civilisation for its wellbeing. But this is not to say that both are without shortcomings and weaknesses. Each could be questioned and criticised and also stands to be corrected. Let the truth and the common good prevail! Muslims should be reminded about the wisdom of science-tradition complementarity, what more when this happens also to be a core teaching of the Qur'an.

Indeed, the best way to go about resolving the tradition-science conflict is through a sustained dialogue in which one would be enriched by the other! In this respect, it is an important point to be noted that during this whole period of lockdowns and mobility control that the whole of humanity is going through, it is not true to say, as maintained by Hoodbhoy, that while science and modern medicine are tirelessly searching for the right vaccines to counter COVID-19, tradition is either doing nothing or doing all the wrong things in the fight against the pandemic. On the contrary, the world's diverse traditional medical and health systems are contributing in their own ways to winning this historic pandemic war, of course not necessarily in the form of direct therapies or remedial cures but no less importantly in the form of "preventive medicine" (Bakar, 2014), that is, hygienic practices and dietary measures that could strengthen a person's immune system. If only all these contributions worldwide have been documented to show tradition's share of the fight against COVID-19, then may be critics would change their biased perceptions of it! These contributions are good illustrations of how tradition complements science in the pursuit of good health both personal and public.

It is also heartening to see a number of articles and news stories that have appeared during this pandemic depicting not only

complementarity between science and tradition but also commonalities in their approaches to the pandemic. Perhaps the most instructive is the *Newsweek* opinion piece by Craig Considine (2020), a Professor at Rice University, USA titled “Can the power of prayer alone stop a pandemic like the coronavirus? Even the Prophet Muhammad thought otherwise.” In his opinion piece, Considine has a simple but significantly profound message to all. He says, “Good hygiene and quarantine, or the practice of isolating from others in the hope of preventing the spread of contagious diseases, [which] are the most effective tools to contain COVID-19” are not just suggested by medical scientists and health care professionals but also by “Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, over 1,300 years ago.” Also significant to the present discussion is the view of Noor Hisham Abdullah, Malaysia’s leading medical scientist who is also its Director General of Health, on the possible use of traditional medicines as treatments of COVID-19 pandemic. He does not discount “the possibility that they may help in the recovery,” but emphasises that they “can be used to complement the treatment instead of being the treatment itself” (The Star, 2020). Abdullah’s positive view that traditional medicine could complement modern treatments of coronavirus is in sharp contrast to that of Hoodbhoy who has only scorns for traditional remedies. While insisting that the fight against coronavirus must be based on “science and facts,” Abdullah (as cited in CGTN, 2020), who is noted for his scientific spirit, does not see his tolerance of traditional medicine as something unscientific!

In the light of the foregoing discussion, one wonders what really motivated Hoodbhoy to use the coronavirus as his new argument to attack tradition in the name of science when others, including scientists, see complementarity instead of enmity between science and tradition in the fight against the pandemic. If science cannot be the real motive, since coronavirus is neutral in the science-tradition conflict, then what is it? Maybe there are deeper motives that we need to look into in the corona article that are non-scientific in nature. Although prior reading of his *Islam and Science* is not necessary for one to have some insights into what these non-scientific motives could possibly be, it would make it a lot easier to identify these motives, since he has staked out in that book an ideological position that apparently underlies the article’s messages.

The Gist of Hoodbhoy's Contentions in the Corona Article

In the corona article, Hoodbhoy takes up the following contentious issues for the readers:

- [1] Beginning his article with an attack on the voices of religion singling out Prime Minister Imran Khan for banning teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in Pakistani schools and universities and ridiculing the theory wherever it is taught.
- [2] Maintaining that no matter what religionists say about Darwin, "every hope for dealing with today's rogue virus rests squarely upon Darwin's 200-year old discovery of the principle of natural selection."
- [3] Tradition and Darwin's natural selection are opposed to each other on the issue of the origin of life on Earth, since tradition believes in "pre-purposed and pre-formed" origin of life, while the latter believes that life forms "randomly appear."
- [4] Thanks to coronavirus, "most educated people begin to understand why scientific approaches work and unscientific ones don't." "Even ultra-conservatives and science-rejecting world leaders are now begging scientists to speed up the rescue work."
- [5] Thanks to biological science founded by Darwin, "the coronavirus will eventually turn out to be a deadly controllable affair," as human lives will "be saved by some yet to be invented drug or vaccine."

Hoodbhoy ends his article with this statement: "All beneficiaries of modern medicine should surely forgive Darwin for his supposed transgressions."

In the author's view, the above five points are the gist of Hoodbhoy's assertions and claims in the corona article. The rest of the article is detailed comments on each of these five points. It is clear from these points that the main focus of Hoodbhoy's treatment is Darwinian theory of natural selection both in relation to its critics as well as in relation to its indispensability to the future of biological science. Four out of five points are in explicit reference to Darwin. This observation together with the fact that Darwin features in the title of the article, its opening

paragraph, and its concluding statement only goes to underscore the central place of his evolutionary theory in the article.

In the following section, an attempt would be made to provide responses to the five points but bearing in mind that part of the responses has already been given in the previous section.

The Author's Response to Hoodbhoy's Corona Article

As the author views it, Hoodbhoy is taking up the issue of the novel coronavirus with the main purpose of remembering and saluting Charles Darwin's contributions to biological science and thereby, intentionally or otherwise, reviving the old debate between religion and science on the issue of organic evolution (Darwin, 1859; Thompson, 1956; Bakar, 1987). Or, one may see his linking of coronavirus to Darwin as an attempt to resurrect the latter's scientific influence and significance that many would agree have steadily waned during the last half century, notwithstanding occasional assurances from evolutionary biologists of their fidelity to Darwin's natural selection. It is to be noted that the twentieth century, beginning in the 1970s has witnessed the profusion of new ideas in evolutionary biology accompanied with calls for, among others, expansion of the evolutionary theory, newer syntheses, and even re-examination of the foundation of biology. In each new synthesis or expanded theory of evolutionary biology that was proposed for consideration by biologists, it could be seen that the place and role of the Darwinian natural selection in the evolutionary mechanism has shrunk in epistemological importance and significance.

One thing is quite clear. In this debate Hoodbhoy is on the side of Darwinian evolution. He presents the coronavirus as if what science now knows about it, is already a big, new argument against religion on the issue of origin of life on Earth. More precisely, he contends that coronavirus proves Charles Darwin is right in his theory of evolution through natural selection and in his idea of the survival of the fittest. In his own words, "evolution maintains that new kinds of life and new molecules randomly appear," and "only those forms of life best adapted to a specific environment survive while all others die away" (Hoodbhoy, 2020). Here, Hoodbhoy is merely stating the classical Darwinian evolutionary doctrine. The random appearance and biological development and

characteristics of coronavirus, he claims, is subject to the same evolutionary process by natural selection. In other words, for him, coronavirus is an excellent illustrative example of how Darwinian natural selection works.

In support of his claim, Hoodbhoy advanced the following argument about the virus. He says, “get yourself some slides and a powerful microscope then wait and watch as cells reproduce. You will soon see some that are imperfect copies. While most [of the] bad ones die away, a few survive and then proliferate” (Hoodbhoy, 2020). In trying to further strengthen the above argument, he adds, “This is . . . how cancerous cells form. Experiments show exactly how certain common species of bacteria respond when their environment is changed,” and then goes on to quote molecular biologist, Harmit Malik, “Viruses evolve, the host adapts, proteins change, viruses evade them” (Hoodbhoy, 2020). The argument Hoodbhoy just provided is not a proof that man’s present knowledge of coronavirus has confirmed Darwin’s theory of natural selection as the principal evolutionary mechanism. Several counter-arguments can be provided to show that it is not a proof, but space does not allow me to go into all of them in this response. Suffice it to say that science is still in the dark about viruses. A virologist sums up nicely the present state of virology as follows: “To date, no clear explanation for the origin(s) of viruses exists. Viruses may have arisen from mobile genetic elements that gained the ability to move between cells. They may be descendants of previously free-living organisms that adapted a parasitic replication strategy. Perhaps viruses existed before, and led to the evolution, of cellular life. Continuing studies may provide us with clearer answers. Or future studies may reveal that the answer is even murkier than it now appears” (Wessner, 2010, p. 37). It appears to me that this quote alone is sufficient to rebut Hoodbhoy’s argument, since it provides a basically accurate portrayal of current virology that is in sharp contrast to some of his misrepresentations of viruses, which he mixes up with cells and bacteria that microbiology teaches us are distinct entities. It would be misleading on his part to make conclusions about the significance of coronavirus in relation to Darwin’s natural selection when he is actually referring to cancerous cells and bacteria and not to viruses as presently understood.

Likewise, it is a misleading proposition for Hoodbhoy to advance, that Darwinian natural selection would be the key to the understanding

of coronavirus. Moreover, it sounds too boastful! In the corona article, he tries to blow out of proportion the significance of what he calls “Darwin’s 200-year-old discovery of the principle of natural selection.” He says, “Hopes for dealing scientifically with the virus rest upon Darwin’s discovery.” There are two responses to this overestimation of the “discovery.” First, he has committed a small but serious error in his arithmetic. Actually, the “discovery” is only 160-year-old, since *The Origin of the Species* in which the principle was first explained was published in 1859. Second, the significance of Darwin’s natural selection as proof of evolution in the classical sense has diminished gradually over the decades as more new discoveries are made in the field of biological studies and related disciplines that throw new light in the understanding of the multiple driving forces of evolution. Worthy of emphasis here is the fact that Darwin’s natural selection is in a number of respects a scientifically impaired biological doctrine, although it is true that it is still adhered to by the majority of biologists for what is popularly assumed to be the lack of a better alternative.

However, voices calling for alternatives have been multiplying, especially since the mid-twentieth century. From the Islamic perspective, the author has argued decades ago that the alternative idea is already in place, not just to natural selection viewed as the primary evolutionary mechanism but also to the evolutionary doctrine itself as this is understood by the Darwinians. The author termed the idea “gradation of beings” (Bakar, 1987). It may be further argued that Darwin didn’t know viruses, since the concept of “virus” was not proposed until Dmitri Iosifovich Ivanovsky (d. 1920), a Russian botanist, discovered it in 1892 about forty years after Darwin published his *The Origin*. Ivanovsky was the first to detail many of the characteristics of the organisms that came to be known as viruses (Ivanovsky, 1892). To round off the argument, scientists are still in dispute about the true nature of viruses. In these circumstances, one wonders how Hoodbhoy could entertain the idea that Darwinian natural selection would work wonders in revealing the mysteries of the viral reality when it is losing its appeal as a theory of how evolution works for the rest of the life forms!

It is quite clear that, epistemologically speaking, coronavirus is neither an argument for Darwinian evolutionary orthodoxy nor an argument against religion. It is also not true to say that the real answer to the coronavirus menace is to be found in Darwin’s theory of natural

selection. Nonetheless, it is rather ingenious of Hoodbhoy to come up with his claim that coronavirus confirms the truth of Darwinian natural selection, and the latter in turn is indispensable to a better science of coronavirus and to the discovery of vaccines to treat COVID-19. Perhaps it is not too difficult to read his motive for advancing the claim. We could see that if the claim about the two-way corona-Darwin link turns out to be true, then it would definitely help tilt the evolution-tradition contention in favour of evolution, which is most probably what Hoodbhoy is hoping for. But those who know well the history of evolutionary biology from its beginning until now will quickly realise that the claim could not be true. The claim is premised on the big assumption that Darwinian natural selection has always been central to evolutionary biology, which is actually far from the case.

Understandably, he wants to make a capital out of the claim and pursue it to its logical conclusion. If we can accept the logic of his claim, then we can see why now would be a good time for him to call on humanity to remember its debt to Darwin, as it is right in the midst of trying to better understand coronavirus and the diseases associated with it and to come up with new vaccines for their treatments. In trying to impress the world on the great relevance of Darwinian natural selection to coronavirus, he has to emphasise the message that natural selection would be the key to success in both the attempt to acquire better scientific knowledge of coronavirus and the attempt to deliver the needed vaccines. "Without Darwinian selection," he says, "one can't even begin to understand microbial-host interaction, the evolution of pathogens, or start developing drug and vaccines." But as is characteristic of him, scientific pronouncements would often go hand in hand with sarcastic remarks, especially against religious and political leaders whom he considers as subscribers of anti-science views. Thus, in the article he has harsh words for those who reject Darwinian evolution by natural selection, including Imran Khan with whom he is known not to be in good terms. Hoodbhoy is also severely critical of traditional medicines generally. Both traditional Hindu and Islamic medicines that are popular in the Indian subcontinent are not spared of his criticism. Especially under heavy fire from him is Narendra Modi for promoting "claims of ancient India's vast medical expertise," which he could only see as extravagant! It is quite plain in the article that while heaping

praise on Darwin, Hoodbhoy has only scorn for the world's traditional medicines and premodern medical and health practices.

It is highly doubtful that when coronavirus becomes better known to science it would only help corroborate the view of Darwinian natural selection as the main driver of evolution. It is possible instead that it would corroborate the minority voices that are critical of the current mainstream evolutionary theory that upholds such a view of natural selection. It is also equally doubtful that Darwinian natural selection would come to the rescue of the global community in its fight against COVID-19 by helping to deliver the awaited vaccines. Science may succeed in finding the right vaccines to coronavirus, but if it succeeds it would be no thanks to Darwinian natural selection. There are several reasons for the doubt. Perhaps the most important is the shaky ground on which the premises of Hoodbhoy's corona-Darwin link are based. Coronavirus needs a more open and more inclusive science, and not the disputed Darwinian theory of natural selection, to help reveal its true identity and properties. Hoodbhoy's basic premise is that Darwinian natural selection is a scientific fact beyond dispute, and not simply a working theory that could be overturned or modified by new revelations in biology. But his confidence in Darwinian natural selection as reflected in his second point of contention is misplaced. Coronavirus that is informed by an epistemological framework of evolutionary biology that is more inclusive than ever before will be more likely to lead to a new understanding of natural selection than to affirm natural selection originally put forward by Darwin.

Darwinism has evolved and with it also the understanding of what natural selection means, especially when other motors of evolution have been added to evolutionary theory in the past century. Since Darwin, evolutionary biological thought underwent two major epistemological transformations. First, the fusion of Darwinian natural selection and Mendelian genetics and to a lesser extent, palaeontology, cytology, and systematics in the 1930s and 1940s to create what is known as the Modern Synthesis (Huxley, 1942). Second, the enlargement of the framework of the Modern Synthesis through the incorporation of new theories and ideas, particularly 'neutral theory,' which emphasises random events in evolution as well as modifications of the framework. This new evolutionary biology, which emerged around the middle of the second half of the 20th century is known as standard evolutionary

theory (SET). SET contends “biological diversity is mostly explained by natural selection,” but natural selection is now defined as “the confluence of *random* phenotypic variation, *genetic* inheritance, and differential reproductive success” (Burdett, 2015). But several years ago another evolutionary framework has emerged known as Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (EES) that is confidently challenging several of the basic tenets of SET (Pigliucci & Muller, 2010; Noble, 2013). In the words of Kevin Laland (2014), one of its architects, EES “maintains that important drivers of evolution, ones that cannot be reduced to genes, must be woven into the very fabric of evolutionary theory” (p. 162). EES is challenging in particular the tenet that phenotypic variation is entirely *random* and that natural selection is entirely driven by *genetic* inheritance. Laland and colleagues argue that, on the basis of empirical evidence, “much variation is not random because developmental processes generate certain forms more readily than others” (p. 162). Further, they maintain that “there is more to inheritance than genes, and that there are multiple routes to the fit between organisms and environments” (p. 162). The latter assertion means that the traditional understanding of natural selection upheld by Hoodbhoy is being seriously questioned.

In the context of our response to the corona article, it is important to pay attention to the various points just highlighted about the history of evolutionary biology since Darwin, and especially on the emergence of EES that presents itself as an alternative perspective on evolutionary biology to SET, the present mainstream position. But Hoodbhoy has ignored them. It seems he is only interested in highlighting an interpretation of natural selection and the idea of random variation that have anti-religious flavour, and worse in a dogmatic fashion! What is urgently needed is an objective narrative of evolutionary theory. It is certainly important to those who would like to see a more enlightened debate on religion and evolution, instead of a vulgar one, to be better informed about the development of evolutionary biology, the pace of which seems to be getting astonishingly more rapid than ever. The EES perspective is particularly important to our discussion, since its current debate with the mainstream evolutionary perspective can teach us good lessons on what it means to have a real scientific culture, which is our common goal, and an enlightened evolution-religion debate which is our concern. One of the lessons is an awareness of the virtues of plurality

of perspectives, be it in science such as on evolutionary theory or in tradition such as on the concept of divine creation. The proponents of EES deserve support when they maintain that “a plurality of perspectives in science encourages development of alternative hypotheses, and stimulates empirical work.” I don’t think the corona article is educating the public on these lessons with its sectarian approach to evolution and religion.

Another lesson that can be learned from the scientific debate between EES and SET is that evolution is found to be no less an emotive issue than religion. Proponents of EES have brought up the issue of how “the mere mention of the EES often evokes an emotional, even hostile, reaction among evolutionary biologists” (Laland et al., 2014, p. 162), particularly among the defenders of SET. The kind of negative reactions as revealed by EES proponents is not new. The author has encountered such kind of reaction before. The author recalls, in 1987, more than a decade before Hoodbhoy published his *Islam and Science*, he edited a book on critiques of Darwin’s evolutionary theory (Bakar, 1987). Even then the author of this article was already able to identify a good number of scientists and scholars who were highly critical of the theory on scientific grounds. So, it is only to be expected that in the new century “the number of biologists calling for change in how evolution is conceptualised is growing rapidly” as asserted by Laland and his colleagues (2014, p. 162). But the author’s book also highlighted the issue of hostility of evolutionists not just to religious but to scientific criticisms as well. He made the observation then that this hostility to criticism of traditional evolutionary theory was to be found among all educated modern men who have embraced evolution not just as a scientific theory but more significantly as an ideological belief or as secular religion. Indeed, there are many people, especially in the West who have adhered to evolution almost as a religion. Traits of religiosity related to beliefs, thinking and hopes that we normally associate in the past with a formal religion like Christianity or Islam are now transposed in the lives of these people to evolutionism. We only hope that as we enter the third decade of the 21st century we would be seeing more enlightened intra-evolutionary and evolution-religion debates.

In choosing the path of confrontation between evolution and tradition Hoodbhoy has proved himself to be objective neither towards evolution nor towards tradition. He has not presented the true face of

tradition nor the true position of evolutionary biology. He presents each in the way he wants to see it. No wonder several respondents to his corona article have severely criticised him for this lack of objectivity. Daniel Haqiqatjou, for example, in his response that appeared in *The Muslim Skeptic* (2020) goes to the extent of criticising Hoodbhoy as “a failure in science and in Islam.” Hoodbhoy’s lack of objectivity may be explained as due to his ignorance of science and tradition. Haqiqatjou’s argument is that he has failed to keep himself “abreast of the latest developments within biology, where even evolutionists are admitting that Darwinism plays no appreciable role in the origins and development of life.” Haqiqatjou supports this argument by citing the names of contemporary scientists whose works have either rejected or critically questioned Darwinian natural selection. These include biologists Denise Noble and Kevin Laland, atheist philosopher Jerry Fodor and biologist Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini who co-authored the book *What Darwin Got Wrong*, another atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel, and computer scientist David Gelernter whose essay ‘Giving up Darwin’ made headlines (Haqiqatjou, 2020).

Being ignorant of the abundant critiques of Darwin’s natural selection, says Haqiqatjou, Hoodhoy continues to hold fast to “the long-debunked Darwinian delusion” and “to subject Pakistan to garish displays of devotion to a long-ago fallen idol of atheistic materialism.” So, we see here Haqiqatjou in his few assertions refuting Hoodbhoy’s claim that Darwin’s natural selection is indispensable to the progress of biological science. Haqiqatjou also briefly comments on Hoodbhoy’s claim that “without Darwinian selection one can’t even begin to understand microbial-host interaction, the evolution of pathogens, or start developing drug and vaccines.” Haqiqatjou dismisses the claim as “laughably false” only to remark that “a basic review of history will prove that an understanding of inoculation against diseases was known as early as the 10th century in China. Vaccines in their modern conception were invented by physician Edward Jenner against small pox in 1796, thirteen years before the birth of Darwin.” Haqiqatjou reminded Hoodbhoy that Jenner was successful in the creation of the vaccines “without knowing anything about Darwinian selection.”

Haqiqatjou also criticised Hoodbhoy for absolutizing Newtonian gravity when saying that without it no physics is possible. Haqiqatjou pointed out that Newton’s Law of Gravitation is a “useful but ultimately

false model of the gravitational force.” It is general relativity that is “now believed to be the true account of the attractive celestial mechanism known as gravity.” This criticism of absolutization of Newtonian gravity is shared by C. K. Raju, a noted Indian scholar in transcultural history and philosophy of scientific thought, another critic of the corona article (Raju, 2020). Raju, however, generalises the issue with the phrase “eternal laws of nature” to provide him with a broader historical and philosophical context for his critique of Hoodbhoy. According to Raju, the idea of “God ruling the world with eternal laws” was a “Christian superstition” that originated with Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. The “Newtonian eternal law of gravity” is just a particularisation of this Thomist theological doctrine. Raju emphasises that the idea of gravity was already known to several non-Western civilisations long before Newton, but it was discussed in philosophical contexts that were different from the Western ones. To the historical evidences Raju has mentioned the following needs to be added. In 11th century Islam, Al-Biruni (d. 1048) and Ibn Sina (d. 1038) exchanged letters discussing among others the issue of the gravity of objects connected to their natural place in the universe (Berjak & Iqbal, 2005). Marking the peak of “medieval physics” the idea of gravity discussed was far more sophisticated than Newton’s conception of gravity.

Raju’s critique of the corona article has an interesting approach. He judges Hoodbhoy, whose mind he seems to know well and whom he used to criticise on several other occasions such as on the issue of Islam and science, in the light of the distinction he makes between true science and false science. Unfortunately, he says, most people, including scientists, don’t understand real science, resulting in their exploitation by opportunists in the name of science. He sees science as false either when it is based on superstitious beliefs and not real knowledge or when it serves evil purposes. To him, the Newtonian eternal law of gravity and other Western conceptions of “laws of nature” are not real science because these are based on wrong cosmological beliefs; and neither is “scientific creationism” true science. And he dismisses as not true science the very science that is pursued for destructive goals or to make maximum profits while violating time-honoured ethical values as in the case of many pharmaceutical companies. On the basis of the distinction he has made, Raju is able to pass judgment that not only is Hoodbhoy ignorant of real science but he has also committed a scientific heresy.

Due to this ignorance, says Raju, Hoodbhoy is found to have passed erroneous judgments such as claiming “Islam is unscientific just because it does not accept the superstitious belief in eternal laws of nature” and “laws are the basis of physics,” and caricaturing traditional medicines.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion it is clear that the underlying motive of Hoodbhoy’s corona article is the defence or empowerment of the classical Darwinian natural selection in the ongoing conflict between science and tradition. Hoodbhoy is not defending it purely viewed as a scientific theory, but rather as an ideology, meaning here the ideology of evolutionism. Of course, his sympathisers would like to read the article as meaning that he really believes biological science and modern medicine alone could address the challenges of coronavirus, but then he sees opponents of Darwinian natural selection and proponents of traditional medicine as standing in the way of their progress. Thus, from his perspective, it is only logical that he has to wage a fight against rejectors of Darwinian evolution and modern medicine and more generally against religious tradition that inspired them. But such a sympathetic reading would be contradictory to messages in the larger part of the article. It has been shown in the previous discussion that he is ignorant of true science, especially contemporary evolutionary biology. He is also ignorant of tradition as a whole. So, how could it be considered as a veritable advocate of scientific progress? On the contrary, it looks like it is he himself that stands in the way of scientific progress!

The worthiness of the corona article needs to be judged in the light of three criteria: (1) contribution to the development of true science both from epistemological and ethical perspectives; (2) promotion of harmony between science and religion or tradition, especially in societies where tradition is a major aspect of life; (3) contribution to public education on the challenges of the pandemic and what our holistic responses should be. Looking back at our discussion, it is not difficult to see that the article has failed to fulfil all three criteria.

The article may best be viewed as an apologia for evolutionism, albeit a poor one! But one also sees elements of scientism in the article. By scientism is meant the philosophical belief that science is the final arbiter of truth and that there is only one way of doing science or arriving at knowledge of the natural world, including the human body, namely the

modern scientific method. It is this scientism that explains Hoodbhoy's rejection of the traditional narrative on the origin of life in favour of Darwinian evolution, and of traditional medicines in favour of modern medicine. Now, the essence of scientism is adherence to rationalism or the pursuit of rationality, an issue that is dear to Hoodbhoy as made clear by his book *Islam and Science*. But rationality and rationalism in their positive traits are not the exclusive monopoly of either science or scientism. Therefore, it is maintained here that it is possible to have a genuine respect for science without subscribing to scientism. It is also possible for religion to be a source of rationality as demonstrated so well by Islam. In the Islamic perspective, religious orthodoxy and intellectuality are not necessarily two opposite and contradictory propositions. Now, taking all the three together – evolutionism, scientism, rationalism – one may ask what is the conceptual relationship between them? In my view, evolutionism needs the support of scientism to stay influential or may be even to stay alive! And scientism may be described as the handmaiden of secular rationalism. But then Islam does contest the fundamental tenets of secular rationalism. No wonder, Hoodbhoy calls his ideological fight against Religious Orthodoxy the “Battle for Rationality!”

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