CHAPTER 5

NAIPUAL’S VIEW OF ISLAM

V.S. Naipaul’s quest for religious vision continues in his journeys to Muslim countries. On the surface it may appear a quest for the assessment of the Islamic threat to Christianity but in depth it represents Naipaul’s persistent search for consolidating his Brahminical bent of mind. As we discussed in the third chapter, Naipaul went to India in search for an area of enlightenment and self identity but to his dismay, he found himself in an abyss of darkness. But even in this darkness he remained attentive to his Brahminic nature and unhesitatingly aligned himself to Brahminic culture. In India: A Wounded Civilization, he lamented the defeat of Hinduism at the hands of Muslim invaders and the British imperialists but he did not forget to underscore the virtues of Aryan religion and its promotion of scientific investigation. Naipaul’s Brahminical or Hindu proclivities surface in his study of the Islamic people and their religion as well. Both Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey (1981) and Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples (1998) which embody Naipaul experiences of his travels to Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia are written by a Hindu Naipaul.

The observation that Naipaul interprets Islam as a Hindu is supported by his tendency to compare Hinduism with Islam, at regular intervals and his evolution of Islamic dogma. Selwyn R. Cudjoe refers to Naipaul’s practice of making comparisons, “[r]oting the difference between the Hindu and Muslim experiences

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in the country of his birth, to demonstrate the incompleteness of Islamic thought."

Furthermore, "he establishes the differences between himself, a Hindu, and Muslims and the notion that Islamic civilization has not reached the heights of (and presumably cannot be compared with) the European renaissance."¹

Naipaul’s attitude towards Islam is entrenched in his Trinidadian days. Most of his views on Muslims and their animosity to Hindus go back to his early experiences. Rob Nixon writes about his, “suspicion of Islamic communities that dates from his childhood”²:

Muslims were part of the small Indian community of Trinidad into which I was born; it could be said that I had known Muslims all my life. I knew little of their religion. My own background was Hindu, and I grew up with the knowledge that Muslims, though ancestrally of India and therefore like ourselves in many ways, were different... The difference was more a matter of group feeling, and mysterious: the animosities our Hindu and Muslims grandfathers had brought from India had softened into a kind of folk-wisdom about the unreliability and treachery of the other side.³

Naipaul maintains these animosities in An Area of Darkness as well. He describes how he was taught to mistrust Muslims. Naipaul’s anti-Muslim bias is visible in the book every now and then. This attitude has been fully analysed by Sudha Rai in her book. Summing up her views, Nixon writes, “Naipaul recounts how a ritualistic meal with a Brahman family ‘dislodge[d] a childhood memory’ and pleasantly ‘awakened a superseded consciousness’; so conversely, his encounters with Muslims on the Indian and the Islamic journies are suffused with the sense of youthful bigotries stirring.”⁴ Cudjoe also speaks of Naipaul’s attitude to Islam. In the same vein, he states, “though he tried to gloss over the antagonism between the Muslims and the Hindus when he lived in Trinidad, he could not
extricate himself from the influence of his formative years” (Cudjoe 202). This disposition cripples, Naipaul’s power of understanding and evaluating Islam. Subsequently, he is not able to give an impartial and objective analysis. He argues:

Islam was a complicated religion. It wasn’t philosophical or speculative. It was a revealed religion, with a Prophet and a complete set of rules. To believe, it was necessary to know a lot about the Arabian origins of the religion, and to take this knowledge to heart.

(Among the Believers 11)

Naipaul believes that Islam is not a progressive religion. It rather leads men backward. Islam does not facilitate intellectual life, nor does it promote the development of individuality. Likewise it does not inculcate a rational temper for scientific knowledge. On the contrary it goes on to produce in its followers hysterical tendencies as well as encourages the spirit of unreason.

Suman Gupta sums up Naipaul’s conception of Islam in five points. First of all, “Islam is, Naipaul suggests, a dogmatic set of rules which were created to be consonant with the spiritual, social and imperial aspirations of the medieval Arabia of and after the Prophet.” Secondly, the Islamic dogma is impervious to social and political changes, as it maintains its medieval regressive character. Thirdly, Islam is paradoxical in nature, since in spite of its imperviousness to change, it is inclined to accept the fruits of the Western civilization. Fourthly, Islam cannot conceive the idea of modern state and fifthly Islam has no creative power.

Naipaul does not conceal his antagonism to Islam, for he uses such epithets of condemnation as parasitic as well as barbarous other derogatory adjectives, used in his earlier travel books. Nixon gives us a list of these adjectives such as,
"resentful," "enraged," "vengeful," "simple," "mimic," "uncreative," "emotional," irrational," "frenzied," "intoxicated"" (Nixon 146). Obviously, Naipaul is not so much against the original Islam. Even though he criticizes its imperial tendencies, he finds something like cosmopolitan character in it. However, Naipaul is bitterly against the modern Islam and its fundamentalism which totally rejects creativity and weds religion with politics, law, and government. Lillian Feder rejects the replacement of the cosmopolitan tradition of Islam by fundamentalism in unequivocal terms. According to him Naipaul is reminded of, ""the Arab glory of a thousand years before, when the Arab faith mingled with Persia, India, and the remnant of the classical world it had overrun, and Muslim civilization was the central civilization of the West.’ This cosmopolitan tradition, with its capacity to inspire a responsive creativity, has been totally rejected, replaced by a narrow fundamentalism that declares that religion, politics, law, and government are one.”

Fundamentalism, as Naipaul believes, undermines reason. It threatens to replace every discipline of knowledge by Islam and in doing so, it wants to revive the medieval tendency of making religion central to every intellectual activity. “Fundamental Islam” as Timothy F. Weiss writes, “has been called both the ‘ultimate ideology of the century’ and the new ‘sleep of reason.’ It is the latter that Naipaul perceives in fundamentalist scholarship and intellectual activities: the atmosphere of the holy city of Qom resembles medieval Europe.”

In order to understand the influence of this fundamentalism to the countries like Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which shaw fundamentalism at its
height, Naipaul verbalizes his experiences of these countries in two books. While *Among the Believers*, he embodies the experiences of his 1979 travel, in *Beyond Belief* he sums up his visits to the same countries sixteen years later i.e. in 1995.

In the former, Naipaul treats Islamic fundamentalism, which raised its head in the late 1970s. Then it was blended with twentieth century ideas of social and political revolution in the Islamic countries. Naipaul goes among the believers who understand and interpret life in terms of Islam. He develops his world vision. “As in earlier journeys,” Timothy F. Weiss writes, “he not only comments on culture and society, but also constructs himself and his world through the journey and commentary. He travels among the believers – peoples who see the world through the lens of their Islamic beliefs and culture – and he critiques the effects of fundamentalist Islam on minds and nations” (Weiss 147).

Naipaul’s study of Islam is vitiated by the limitations of a selective approach. Islam is a world-religion as its followers are scattered in more than hundred countries. It claims the allegiance of as many as eight hundred forty million people and forms one-fifth of world-population. But Naipaul undertakes the journey only of four countries, which experienced the upsurge of fundamentalism. Hence his intention is to overview the radical form of Islam and its impact on the modern world. As Weiss states, “Naipaul’s Islamic journey stops in only four countries; it does not include historically and politically important Egypt and Saudi Arabia, or the more moderate Maghreb (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria). His Islamic journey is, therefore, a highly selective one. His book does not claim to comment on all Islamic societies, but rather on fundamentalist Islam,
and more narrowly on the conjunction of Islamic religion and revolution in four nations. This limited scope, although not self-evident in the book’s title, should make it clear that Naipaul travels and writes not exactly as a sociologist, but as a writer with a certain range of interests and a certain way of looking” (Weiss 147-148).

However, there is an important reason behind this selective approach. Naipaul selects only those countries which have taken a decisive lead in accepting the Western science and technology as well as the idea of modern polity. Here again his choice is influenced by his inherent idea of comparison or rather antagonism of Hinduism and Islam. While visiting these countries he wants to see how far the revolutionary Iran has imbibed the spirit of the Western science and technology. He also wants to see success of the idea of modern state in Pakistan. Likewise, he wants to have the first hand idea of industrialization in Malaysia. Much in the same way he wants to go to Indonesia to know about Islam in action and Hindu-Buddhist background of the Indonesian Islam, Naipaul undertakes all these journeys with an implicit spirit of making comparison. He wants to know how far these countries have succeeded in adapting themselves to the modern conditions, as Hinduism has done by getting itself liberated and establishing modern institutions, by imbibing and adopting scientific spirit and technology; and by the cultivation of Brahminic values of the Aryan past. Hence his selective journeys to Islamic countries are directed towards achieving a religious vision.

In his selective journeys, Naipaul tries to cover every form of Islam, Shia, Sunni, Ahamadia, and Bahais. He begins with Shia Islam of Iran that is eventually
opposed to the Islam of Saudi Arabia or Sunni Islam. “Iran’s Shia Muslims recognize a different line of succession to the Prophet. Each branch regards the other as a heresy. Naipaul says that Islam from the start was imperialistic, a religion which rapidly became an empire. The Iranian Shia version belongs to the losing side of Islamic history and has made a cult of suffering and martyrdom. It looks forward to a hidden messiah, a ‘Twelfth Imam’, who will return to earth as a political and religious leader. Ayatollah Khomeini took on this role as God’s voice and judge.”

Evidently, the new Shia Islam is not the old Islam of suffering and martyrdom but of insurgency. It stands for two things: the opposition to the Western culture and the revival of the old religion based on Prophet’s life and hadith as interpreted by Caliphs.

Naipaul begins his book Among the Believers with his Shia experiences in Iran. He tells us that his first thought of a journey to Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia was the result of the coverage of Iranian revolution by American television. With this coverage he was struck by contradictions in the attitudes of Iranian students in the United States. “What primarily engaged him was their simultaneous attraction to and rejection of the educational opportunities and social freedom America offered them” (Feder 59). Naipaul evinced keen interest in the statement which proclaimed “the beauty of Islamic law,” (Among the Believers 17), while studying American law in the United States. He wanted to know what had attracted these Iranians to the United States and the civilization it represented. He surmised that it was not just the need for education and skills but an unadmitted attraction to dandyism, mimicry, boasting, and rejection.
Interestingly, Naipaul begins his book with the discussion of Islam as a complicated religion sans philosophical or speculative proclivities. As a revealed religion, it was influenced by its Arabian origins. Coming to Iran, as Naipaul tells us, it becomes all the more complicated. Shedding its imperial character it becomes doctrinal and attuned to suffering. Thus Shia Islam adopts a posture quite opposed to the Arabic Islam:

Islam in Iran, Shia Islam, was an intricate business. To keep alive ancient animosities, to hold on to the idea of personal revenge even after a thousand years, to have a special list of heroes and martyrs and villains, it was necessary to be instructed. And Behzad hadn't been instructed; he had simply stayed away. He had, if anything, been instructed in disbelief by his father, who was a communist. It was of the poor rather than of the saints that Behzad's father had spoken. The memory that Behzad preserved with special piety was of the first day his father had spoken to him about poverty – his own poverty, and the poverty of others.

*AAmong the Believers* 12

Subsequently during the Iranian revolution against monarchy, the Shia Islam became fundamentalist in its character.

However, before unfolding the Shia fundamentalism, Naipaul is keen to reveal his Hindu vein of mind. He tells us about his Trinidadian experiences with Muslims and his limited knowledge of Islamic theology. Naipaul reveals that his knowledge of Islam was limited only to some of its basic beliefs and to its rites and rituals. In his Trinidad days, he was ignorant as much about Islam as about Hinduism. In his opinion Hinduism and Islam were like chains to their adherents. About Hinduism, he writes:

I was without religious faith myself. I barely understood the rituals and ceremonies I grew up with. In Trinidad, with its many races, my Hinduism was really an attachment to my family and its ways, an
attachment to my own difference; and I imagined that among Muslims and others there were similar attachments and privacies.

(Among the Believers 15)

As regards Islam, Naipaul states:

What I knew about Islam was what was known to everyone on the outside. They had a Prophet and a Book; they believed in one God and disliked images; they had an idea of heaven and hell – always a difficult idea for me. They had their own martyrs. Once a year mimic mausolea were wheeled through the streets; men ‘danced’ with heavy crescent moons, swinging the moons now one way, now the other; drums beat, and sometimes there were ritual stick-fights.

He continues:

The stick-fights were a mimicry of an old battle, but the procession was one of mourning, commemorating defeat in that battle. Where had that battle taken place? What was the cause? As a child, I never asked; and it was only later that I got to know that the occasion – in which Hindus as well as Muslims took part – was essentially a Shia occasion that the battle had to do with the succession to the Prophet, that it had been fought in Iraq, and that the man being especially mourned was the Prophet’s grandson.

(Among the Believers 15-16)

Naipaul’s views on Islam are formed on the basis of his interaction with his guide Behzad, Ayatollah Shirazi, and Ayatollah Khalkhali and his visit to the city Qom. With his interaction with Behzad, a Marxist revolutionary university student who is against the religious direction of the Iranian revolution, he comes to know about the intentions of “the religious fundamentalists who want to cleanse society of everything alien including Marxism and who do not hesitate to execute those who oppose them” (King 168). Behzad is opposed not only to this form of Islamic revolution but also to modernization initiated by the king. He is puzzled by the
posters regarding the arrival of Twelfth Imam. Behzad has his own problem. “Not himself religious, he cannot help Naipaul to understand the revolution’s emotional force. The communist son of a communist father, Behzad is a thoughtful political activist who knows little of the complicated history of Iranian Islam and is as unawed by its past power as by the great.”

Naipaul’s interaction with the two Ayatollahs are also abortive in as much as he fails to penetrate into their mind and to know their world vision. His interview with Shirazi is a failure, in as much as he does not succeed to elicit Ayatollah’s responses to him, “as man without religion, and as a man of an idolatrous-mystical-animistic background” (Among the Believers 52). As for Ayatollah Khalkhali, Naipaul is refused admission to the inner life to the judge and his circle. Naipaul feels that he has been denied any intellectual or emotional connection with them.

As regards his experiences of the holy city of Qom, Naipaul finds that the whole intellectual atmosphere of the city resembles that of the medieval Europe. He visualizes how the fundamentalist scholarship and intellectual activities influence people’s life. Naipaul finds that the Shia scholarship has acquired a medieval character. “In Naipaul’s view,” writes Timothy F. Weiss, “revolutionary fundamentalist Islam advocates, ironically, changelessness, not change, it is a return to the past, a death. He critiques the fundamentalist vision of the ‘theocentric society’” (Weiss 150).

In his visit to Pakistan, Naipaul finds Islam more bewildering state than in Iran. When he goes to Pakistan, he finds that there are more religious fantasies.
his visit, he wants to examine these religious fantasies or what has been defined as Islam in action. Naipaul’s interest stems from the fact that Pakistan is the first modern country which has linked religion and statehood and stands for purity of the Islamic institutions. Subsequently he comes to know that “Islam does not signify political institutions and economic transactions, but rather religious activities governed by high standards of a faith controlled by seemingly infinite numbers of rules. Since Islam does not acknowledge secular needs, interests, and divisions, its politics is chaotic” (Barnouw 60).

During his stay, Naipaul comes in contact with several people including his guides. One of them is a lady guide, briefly assigned to Naipaul by the Pakistan Information Service. She belongs to Ahmadiya set which has been declared non-Muslim by Bhutto, “Ahmadis in Pakistan, somewhat like the Bahais in Iran, constitute a domestic religious minority whose persecution has been sanctioned by the state. Naipaul’s curiosity about them, which leads him to seek out their headquarters, is stimulated by the fact that as a community, Ahmadis are heavily represented in professional, international, and intellectual fields.”10 Another guide Ahmed, a highly ranking official, helps him to understand Islam in racial terms. He tells Naipaul that, “Islam is the most evolved religion, combining Moses passion for the law and Jesus compassion for the needy. He is clearly impressed by Ahmed’s passion to make sense of his life, ‘leaning’ on this sudden friendship to learn more about Islamic institutions and experiments. Ahmed’s ‘rationality’ is important to Naipaul, because it seems to shift the question of cultural meaning from the opaque collective to the distinct historical individual. The core of Islam
for Ahmed is charity as a personal and not a collective virtue, focused on the individual with a tenderness that moves Naipual, who is also attracted to Ahmed’s quiet and gentle son, a young physician working with the poor” (Barnouw 61).

Naipaul is also helped in his mission by a prominent Karachi lawyer Khalid Ishaq, a migrant from India, a mohajir and a member of the influential Islamic Ideological Council. He devotes much of his time to public issues in Pakistan. Naipaul also comes to know that the “political vacuum is created not by chaos, as it is in Africa and the Caribbean, but by the tightly arranged elaborate sets of rules that account for the purity and wholeness, the fearful innocence of the faith” (Barnouw 62). The lawyer emphasises the role of mosque, as an instrument of equality and the repercussions of mystical tendencies, among the modernists who believe that the man of faith is also a good leader. Summing of Khalid’s views, Dagmar Barnouw writes:

For the lawyer, the equality of people is in obedience to the law, with the mosque as the great equalizer; the Islamic enterprise means the creation of a theocratic state whose institutions could function in the modern world. The problem lies with the “modernists” among Islamizers, newcomers to Islam who prefer mysticism over political information. Like the mullahs whom the military government enlisted to help with Islamization, they see every thing in terms of the true believer as the good leader, not in terms of good institutions. Given the gap between the ideal of the pure faith and the reality of Pakistan’s political insecurity, the pure faith provides only negations: no alcohol, no (female) immodesty, no political parties, no secular courts of law. Existing institutions are declared un-Islamic and the political vacuum calls for army rule (Barnouw 62).

Naipaul is also bewildered to find how the religion of revelation is mixed with a religion of asceticism and charity. A puzzled Naipaul goes on to comment:
He had known nothing about me before we met. His response to me had been the pure response of man to man; and I had responded to that. But now perhaps he had been told that I was not what I said I was. He became cold on the telephone; he failed to keep two appointments. So I couldn’t talk about the sufi centre with him. I couldn’t discuss with him whether the mixing of the two types of religion – the religion of revelation and rules, the religion of asceticism and unconfined meditation – didn’t diminish both. Nor could I find out more about the ‘co-operatives’ of his youth or about his idea of the period-less purity of women in paradise. As with the boy’s story of the Bengali who had left penniless for Karachi and come back with a car, I had to be content with what I had.

(Among the Believers 147)

In Pakistan as well Naipaul finds that the Islamic fundamentalism, is caught between the East and the West. While rejecting the Western rationality it willingly accepts its technology. Nevertheless, it is not interested in its secular institutions which promise a better future to their members. To quote Dagmar Barnouw again:

In his reaction to their retreating from him, Naipaul is frightened by the believers’ simplicity because he finds in it the terrible finality of a profound and basic tension between East and West on which all these Islamic fundamentalisms thrive. He is disturbed not so much by their general rejection of Western rationality as by their lack of interest in secular political and cultural institutions that would enable the individual to feel at home in the world for a time (Barnouw 63).

In his visit to Malaysia Naipaul finds the same dilemma among people in relation to science and modern technology. Though the Malaysians want to recover the pastoralism and the romantic innocence of their old faith, they, at the same time, do not want to overlook the benefits of industrialization. Immensely, benefitting from the boom of modern technology, they inculcate “the rage of a pastoral people with limited skills, limited money, and a limited grasp of the world is comprehensive” (Among the Believers 214).
Naipaul airs his views in his interaction with Shafi, a thirty two year old small, and slander man, who works for a Muslim youth movement. Nostalgic for the village life of his boyhood, he is determined to reform the pre-Islamic old ways of his village. He also wants to cleanse his Malya people. A man of wide ranging interests, he is in touch with the Islamic movement of other countries. Sketching his portrait Naipaul writes:

He was in touch with Muslim movements abroad – in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan. He had been to Iran and met Ayatollah Khomeini; that had added to his reputation locally. For Anwar Ibrahim Islam was the energizer and purifier that was needed in Malaysia; true Islam awakened people, especially, Malays, and at the same time it saved them from the corruption of the racialist politics of Malaysia, the shabbiness of the money culture and easy Western imitation.

(Among the Believers 218-19)

Evidently Shafi represents the Islamic revival in Malaysia, which for him (Naipaul) a way of getting even with the world. This movement grows out of the tensions and inadequacies existing in the Malaysian world, inhabited by rural Malays, urban Chineses, business owners, and Indian plantation workers. This movement focuses its attention on what it called Malaya grief, which comes out of the feelings of inadequacy social rage and racial hate. Naipaul portrays this grief through Shafi, who is sore of the industrial pollution exemplified by the contamination of the stream near his village by a Chineses-run Batik factory.

It is not the only cause of Shafi’s grief. There are other causes as well. He is aggrieved by backwardness of Malayas, their poverty, and their lack of
intellectuality as well. While the Pakistanis want to recover the early Islamic way, Shafi desires something more in the form of his childhood experience:

In Pakistan the fundamentalists believed that to follow the right rules was to bring about again the purity of the early Islamic way; the reorganization of the world would follow automatically on the rediscovery of the true faith. Shafi’s grief and passion, in multi-ethnic Malaysia, were more immediate; and I felt that for him the wish to re-establish the rules was also a wish to re-create the security of his childhood, the Malay village life he had lost.

Some grief like that touches most of us. It is what, as individuals, responsible for ourselves, we constantly have to accommodate ourselves to. Shafi, in his own eyes, was the first man expelled from paradise. He blamed the world; he shifted the whole burden of that accommodation on to Islam.

(Among the Believers 227-28)

However, Naipaul supports Shafi’s feeling against the destruction of the village identity through industrialization, he does not like Shafi’s idea “backlash idea of a return to a former state of innocence or underdevelopment,” since as Naipaul contends, “[t]he fantasy of a paradise regained will neither clean up the polluted stream nor save what is left of the Malay villages” (Weiss 154).

According to Lillian Feder, “Shafi’s ambivalence helps him to understand the complex reactions to the new Islam of people he encounters in Indonesia” (Feder 64). In Jakarta, Naipaul feels that he is in a country, which has a sense of its past and which defines the uniqueness of Indonesians. The Islam of Indonesia is not the Islam of either Arabia or Persia but the part of the composite religion, which includes Hindu and Buddhist elements.

While in Indonesia, Naipaul comes in contact with a number of people including Darma-sastri Suryadi, Prasojo, Umar, Adi, and Imaduddin. Naipaul
begins to describe his experience by telling that Islam came to Indonesia in the fifteenth century and was accepted as the formal faith.

But the pre-Islamic past, that in Malaysia seemed to be only a matter of village customs, in Indonesia – or Java – showed as a great civilization. Islam, which had come only in the fifteenth century, was the formal faith. But the Hindu-Buddhist past, that had lasted for 1400 years before that, survived in many ways – half erased, slightly mysterious, but still awesome, like Borobudur itself. And it was this past which gave Indonesians – or Javanese – the feeling of their uniqueness.

(Among the Believers 279)

Although the religious of the Hindu-Buddhist past continue to animate the Islam of the country but they are no longer form parts of a system. Nevertheless, Indonesians are proud of these religious like Pakistanis. They are not inclined to do away with them. Naipaul state:

Islam was the formal faith of the people. But below that were the impulses of the older world, relics of the Hindu-Buddhist-animist past, but no longer part of a system. The ninth-century temples of Borobudur and Prambanam – the first Buddhist, the second Hindu – were a cause for pride. But they were no longer fully possessed by the people, because they were no longer fully understood. Their meaning, once overpowering, now had to be elucidated by scholars; and Borobudur remained a mystery, the subject of academic strife. It was the Dutch who rediscovered Borobudur and presented it to the people of Java: that was how Gunawan Mohammed, a poet and editor, put it. Gunawan – a Muslim, but in his own Indonesian way – said, speaking of the past, and making a small chopping gesture, ‘Somewhere the cord was cut.’

(Among the Believers 284-85)

The Indonesian followers of Islam are seldom as orthodox as their Pakistani and Malaysian counterparts. Many of them are Muslims in a nominal sense. For example, Suryadi is only a statistical Muslim:
He had received no religious training; such religion as he had was what was in the air around him. He wasn’t sure whether he believed in the after-life; and he didn’t know that that belief was fundamental to the Muslim faith.

(Among the Believers 281)

However, on the contrary his daughter is a staunch Muslim, who eventually becomes “a convert to the new Muslim cause the Malaysian disease, some people called it here” (Among the Believers 283).

The Muslims of Sumatra are more staunch in their faith than those of Java. The representative of these Muslims is Sitor Situmorang who is tribal by birth. Sitor is a celebrated Indonesian poet. Naipaul becomes acquainted with another staunch Muslim. Adi who considers Islam superior to Christianity and Hinduism. As he tells Naipaul:

‘My parents were Muslim. It is also more logical than Catholicism. That Trinity business is something I cannot understand Protestantism is better. Hinduism has caste. That I reject.’

(Among the Believers 288)

Adi Sasono advises Naipaul to go to the countryside and to have a look at the traditional Islamic village scholars who can give him a correct understanding Indonesian Muslims. It is only in these schools known as pesantrens, he can find a true idea of Islam and its followers. Subsequently Naipaul goes to meet these scholars with Prasojo, a nineteen year old college student. The boy makes him (Naipaul) acquainted with the legacies of the pre-Islamic past. He tells him about many things which remind him of their Indian origin. As Naipaul writes:

This was how the pre-Islamic past survived: as tradition, as mystery.
Indrapura, ‘Indra’s City’, was painted on the bus in front of us; and Indra Vijaya, ‘The Victory of Indra’, was on many snops. But this
Indra was no longer the Aryan god of the Hindu pantheon. To Prasjo, as well as to the driver of our car, this Indra was only a figure from the Javanese puppet drama. Prasjo began telling me a local Muslim legend of five Pandava brothers, who represented the five principles of Islam. And I don’t believe Prasjo had an idea of the true wonder of the legend: the story he was telling me came from the ancient Hindu epic of the Mahabharata, which had lived in Java for 1400 years, had taken Javanese roots, and had then been adapted to Islam. Prasjo, a Javanese and a Muslim, lived with beautiful mysteries. Scholarship, applied to his past, would have undermined what had become his faith, his staff.

(Among the Believers 298-99)

Interestingly, Naipaul also finds the remnants of Hindu rituals in Indonesian Muslims. He is pleasantly surprised, when he goes to visit the house of a Muslim koum which literally means ‘elder.’ In Muslim families, koum has an important part to play, especially on important occasions, like the birth of a child, the funeral of the dead, and anniversary of the member of the family or on whatever occasion, family wish to have a religious ceremony. The koum is supposed to perform these rituals. Naipaul himself participates in one of them called salamatan. “This ritual” Naipaul writes:

had to do with the consecration of food and the distribution of the consecrated food. From my Hindu childhood I recognized the ceremony as a Hindu survival, and thought of the Muslim koum as a kind of successor to the Hindu priest.

(Among the Believers 324)

Naipaul’s interaction with Indonesian Muslims persuades him to conclude that most of the Indonesian Muslims are not orthodox. On the contrary most of them are tolerant, and are willing to accommodate stories and ideas which do not
belong to Muslim orthodoxy. His dialogue with Umar confirms the liberal attitude of these Muslims.

It was a way that was no longer being followed, he said. Only a third of the Muslims lived as Muslims; only a third went to the mosque. There was a change among the young, though. Why? Perhaps, he said, it was because in the government school religion was being taught as a subject, and the young people had to study it if they wanted to get good grades.

He and Umar talked some more. The slender, long-legged cocks of Java walked about the damp yard; the cows’ bells tinkled; the old man’s wife watched us from the dark, junk-filled verandah and smiled.

Umar said, ‘I’ve been asking him about the wayang.’ The puppet theatre. ‘Whether as a Muslim he objected to the Hindu stories. He said no; they were just stories.’

(Among the Believers 325-26)

Obviously, the Indonesians seem to believe in a composite culture in which Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism coexist. Naipaul states:

Islam, like Christianity, complemented the older religions. The religion of the village was a composite religion; the idea of the good life was a composite idea. People lived with everything at once: the mosque, the church, Krishna, the rice goddess, a remnant of Hindu caste, the Buddhist idea of nirvana, the Muslim idea of paradise.

(Among the Believers 326)

Indeed, many of the Indonesians cannot define their identity in terms of one or the other religion. Naipaul’s cites a story of the people of Prambanan who were confused about their religious identity. Naipaul describes their dilemma in his own style, stating that:

The people of Prambanan were in a quandary. In one way they were Muslims, believing in the Prophet and his paradise. But
they didn’t feel they could say they were Muslims; they broke too many of the rules. They knew that their ancestors had built the great ninth-century temples of Prambanam – which people from all over the world now came to visit; and though they no longer fully understood the significance of the temples, they knew they were Hindu temples. They liked watching the puppet plays based on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and they knew that these were Hindu epics. So the Prambanam people felt they should declare themselves Hindus.

(Among the Believers 327)

The trouble then was that they didn’t know what they should do as Hindus. They had no priests and no idea of the rituals they should perform. They sent for Balinese Hindu priests, and the Balinese came over with a Balinese gamelan orchestra to instruct them. But it didn’t work. The past couldn’t be reconstructed; the old rituals and theology couldn’t take again. And so the people of Prambanam had returned to being what they had been, people of a composite religion.

(Among the Believers 327)

In this way, Indonesia for Naipaul becomes a prototype of a composite culture. However, towards the end of his journey he becomes conscious of the presence of fundamentalist elements raising their doubts against this composite culture. He learns about Imadduin who is a better critic of this shared culture.

In the final chapter, Naipaul sums up his ideas about Islamic response to modern ideas and technology. He finds that Iranians are hanging between faith and tradition on the one hand and the contemporary world on the other. As for Pakistani:

Islam was more than personal salvation, more than a body of belief; it had become country, culture, identity; it had to be served, at whatever cost to the individual or the state itself.

(Among the Believers 364)
While in Malaysian Islam Naipaul visualizes an element of rage, in Indonesian Islam, he sees a light of composite religion.

Coming to the revivalist Islam, Naipaul finds that it depends upon the West. According to Weiss, “Naipaul deconstructs Islamic fundamentalism; he critiques its authoritarian ideology, inverting fundamentalism’s cherished conception of itself: its wholeness, its antiquity, its purity, its independence of Western ideological frameworks” (Weiss 157). As we have mentioned earlier, Naipaul visualizes fundamentalist Islam as practiced in Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia with Hindu eyes. After his visits to these countries, he concludes that the fundamentalist Islam is inadequate and ill-equipped to react to the Western ideas and technology.

Now Naipaul wants to see whether Hinduism has sufficient dynamism to adapt itself to modern demands of science and technology. For the affirmation of his view-point he goes to visit India once again. With this visit he becomes convinced that the Brahmin streak in Hinduism makes it quite capable of successfully confronting modern science. Naipaul also goes on to believe that Hinduism is capable of coming to terms with its past. “During his travels in India in 1988 and 1989” writes Lillian Feder, “Naipaul had witnessed the persistence of Hinduism adapted to the modern world in science, in politics, in domestic life, even in an agrahara. Now, he hopes, it can help in coming to terms with the past” (Feder 134). Naipaul himself believes that, “[w]e should make ourselves see how far these old invasions and wars had beaten India down and how far we have
come." He becomes sure that India will also be successful in dealing with modern political institutions including democracy.

After visit to India Naipaul revisits the four Muslim countries with the success story of Hinduism in mind. He wants to see afresh how far Islamic revivalism or fundamentalism is successful to handle science and technology, its past, and democratic institutions. Even though, Naipaul aims at judging the capabilities of Islam, he does not understand it (Islam) fully. As Suman Gupta states, he does not rigorously define the term. “Naipaul uses it to describe a medley of phenomena, the links between which are assumed rather than given” (Gupta 76). Understandingly, Naipaul should have started his journey with much more sound knowledge of Islamic theology, history, politics, and sociology, of the Islamic people. However, Naipaul woefully lacks the knowledge of Islamic background. For all intents and purposes, his knowledge of this religion remains superfluous. “Naipaul seems,” writes Suman Gupta, “unable to discern between socialist and Islamic revolutions suggests a superficial understanding of the former and his reflections on both are largely guided by superficial comments about social psyche” (Gupta 77).

Naipaul’s observations of the Islamic panorama in Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia is conditioned by his preconceived notions of Islam as a religion, which is imperial, regressive, and medieval in character. In the prologue of his book, he describes the Islamic imperialism of Arabia, giving an account of its expansion and conversion of people to Islam.
Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's world view alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil.\footnote{12}

Since the Arab imperialism is medieval in character, it does not allow Muslims to inculcate new ideas. Subsequently, Islamic countries remain bereft of the fruits of new learning in India. While Hindus are able to reap the fruits of Renaissance and revise their ideas in the light of science and technology, the Muslims continue to shut off from the new ideological advancements. Naipaul writes:

The British period [in India] – two hundred years in some places, less than a hundred in others – was a time of Hindu regeneration. The Hindus, especially in Bengal, welcomed the New Learning of Europe and the institutions the British brought. The Muslims, wounded by their loss of power, and out of old religious scruples, stood aside. It was the beginning of the intellectual distance between the two communities. This distance has grown with independence; and it is this – more even than religion now – that at the end of the twentieth century has made India and Pakistan quite distinct countries. India, with an intelligentsia that grows by leaps and bounds, expends in all directions. Pakistan, proclaiming only the faith and then proclaiming the faith again, ever shrinks.

\textit{(Beyond Belief 65)}

As for conversion Naipaul believes that it has its own repercussions, since it develops in people a reaction against their own language and sacred places. Peoples converted to Islam, he says, become part of the Arab story. But they reject
their own histories and turn away from nearly everything that is theirs. As a result, he writes, people “develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can easily be set on the boil.” Naipaul goes on to argue that conversion “can be seen as a kind of crossover from old beliefs, earth religions, the cults of rulers and local deities, to the revealed religions? Christianity and Islam principally? With their larger philosophical and humanitarian and social concerns.”¹³ In this way, Naipaul concludes that in the process of crossover the converted people turn against their own past. This tendency creates a spiritual void within the hearts of the converted people:

So it is strange to someone of my background that in the converted Muslim countries – Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia – the fundamentalist rage is against the past, against history, and the impossible dream is of the true faith growing out of a spiritual vacancy.

(Beyond Belief 59)

Most of the arguments of Naipaul spring from his own early experiences i.e. his consciousness of Hindu childhood in Trinidad. Naipaul has also undergone the trauma of a person. Ian Buruma believes that his views are affected by his own preoccupation. “For Naipaul too” Ian Buruma writes, “has had fantasies, of the old world, of the Indian past, of history, about which he has written a great deal. He often projects these fantasies onto those of others” (Buruma n.p.).

Naipaul is painfully aware of the process of conversion brought by the religions like Christianity and Islam, which demand total conversion and the eradication of the original culture of the converted people. “While the extinction of
local religions by Christianity happened long ago in Europe, in Indonesia, Malaysia and other non-Arab areas of the Islamic world such a process is taking place now where fundamentalism is rooting out whatever does not confirm to the Koran" (King 173).

Interestingly, Naipaul begins his observation with Indonesia visualizing the difficulties of the converted people and their effort to root out the residue of their cultural past. He notes how Islam and European culture combined to remove the Buddhist Hindu relics in Indonesia:

Islam and Europe had arrived here almost at the same time as competing imperialisms, and between them they had destroyed the long Buddhist-Hindu past. Islam had moved on here, to this part of Greater India, after its devastation of India proper, turning the religious-cultural light of the subcontinent, so far as this region was concerned, into the light of a dead star. Yet Europe had dominated so quickly here that Islam itself had begun to feel like a colonised culture.

(Beyond Belief 31)

In his first visit, Naipaul has noticed how the Indonesians, especially the Javanese, have learnt to adopt the stories of the Indian epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata to their own cultural needs. But in the second visit, he finds that the fundamentalist Islam is putting tremendous pressure on its adherents to do away with their Hindu and Buddhist legacy. In this way, he finds the old “composite religion [is] gradually giving way before the new Islam that [has] begun to infiltrate the village, bringing faith with political roots” (Feder 138).

Naipaul substantiates his views on process of conversion, citing the stances of Imaduddin, Mr. Wahid, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, and Linus who represent four different types of religious trends prevalent in Indonesia. Imaduddin who met
Naipaul towards the end of the first trip, is still engaged in his relentless pursuit of the Islamization of Indonesia. With his patron Habibie, he is determined to promote Islam religion along with science. Imamuddin is among the people who maintain an ambivalent attitude towards the West. While he depends on the modern world, he does not hesitate to reject it at one and the same time. Working in unison with Habibie, Imamuddin becomes the founder of the Association of the Muslim Intellectuals in order to promote the cause of Islam. The members of this association while promoting science are equally determined to dismiss “the old ritual ways.” It is no wonder that in Imamuddin and his men, Naipaul sees a threat to the old religious beliefs. As he writes:

To possess or control these schools was to possess power. And I began to feel that Imamuddin and the Association of the Muslim Intellectuals – with their stress on science and technology, and their dismissing of old ritual ways – aimed at nothing less. The ambition was stupendous: to complete the take-over of this part of the world, and to take the islands to their destiny as the leader of Islamic revival in the twenty-first century.

(Beyond Belief 24)

Imamuddin’s antithesis Mr. Wahid represents, “a different, more pacific and tolerant tradition within Islam.” Wahid who was later to follow Habibie as the president of Indonesia, “believes in Islam as a moral force which should be kept separate from politics” (King 175). He belongs to a long tradition of religious boarding schools starting with the Buddhist monks and the Islamic Sufis that began when Indonesia was only half converted. This tradition of pesantren devoted itself to teach the Islamic way of life. Mr. Wahid had also, “inherited the leadership of the NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), a revisionist Muslim party related to the
pesantren, which his father had established in 1952. In 1984 Wahid had divorced
the NU from politics, and he has persisted in his belief that Islam must not be
politicized, that it is a moral force which works through ethics and morality”
(Feder 144).

Wahid’s idea of separation of politics and religion is also influenced by the
failure of religious politics in many Islamic countries like Pakistan, Sudan, Iran,
and Saudi Arabia where attempts to enforce religion resulted in violence. Wahid,
unlike his political counterparts is determined to defend multi-religious culture
against the attacks of Muslim zealots, “Descended from a grandfather and a father
who made the pilgrimage to Mecca, a man who values and teaches Islamic
traditions, he [Wahid] would protect the diverse non-Islamic population of
Indonesia – Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian – against fundamentalism” (Feder
145).

Another conservative Muslim Dewi Fortuna Anwar, a civil servant, is also
responsive to her multi-religious inheritance. As Feder states, she continues to be
“loyal to her ancestry” (Feder 145). While visiting Dewi’s village, she becomes
conscious of the obliteration of the Hindu-Buddhist past at the hands of
Christianity and Islam. Naipaul goes on to point out the cruelty of Islam in
stripping people of their past:

The cruelty of Islamic fundamentalism is that it allows only to one
people – the, Arabs, the original people of the Prophet – a past, and
sacred places, pilgrimages and earth reverences. These sacred Arab
places have to be sacred places of all the converted peoples.
Converted peoples have to strip themselves of their past; of
converted peoples nothing is required but the purest faith (if such a
thing can be arrived at), Islam, submission. It is the most uncompromising kind of imperialism.  

(Beyond Belief 72)

However, the most important experience of Naipaul in Indonesia surfaces in the form of his interaction with Linus the Javanese young poet who is on the brink of fame in 1979. Linus, a catholic by faith, is in serious trouble with young Muslim fundamentalists. Linus’s Catholicism provides the fourth dimension to Indonesian religious consciousness. “When his parents,” writes Dagmar Barnouw, “converted to Catholicism in 1938, they simply added their new religion to their familiar Javanist practices, a local mix of Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism.” Interestingly, Linus’s religion represents a process, not of break but of continuity. “Unlike Islam, Catholicism has not demanded a break with the past but allowed for more gentle transitions” (Barnouw 70). Linus’s village, like that of Naipaul’s village in Trinidad, displays a composite culture with ruins of Hindu, Buddhist, and Hindu-Buddhist temples. To the legacies of these ruins Linus’s family adds yet another legacy in the form of catholic-Javanese spiritualism. Interestingly, spiritualism of Linus and the mystical group receive encouraging messages from Siddhartha, the Indian Javanese divinity. Describing his mystical experiences Linus tells Naipaul:

With no change of tone, he said, ‘I think the spirit of Siddhartha often comes to teach us, to teach wisdom in living. He comes to a small group of my friends. When we collect together, in the night usually, the spirit of Siddhartha will come sometimes to teach us, and we will ask him about our problems. Sometimes he writes on the palm of my friend Landung, a poet and translator. I can’t read it, but my other friend, a woman – she works as a palace guide in Yogya – she can read it. Landung will feel somebody writing on his palm: tuk, tuk, tuk, like that. And at the last the
person writing will write his name: Sincerely, Siddhartha. And my woman friend can read what Siddhartha has written.

(Beyond Belief 96)

Eventually, Siddhartha is accorded the same status by the group as Jesus and Mohammed. By invoking the spirituality of Siddhartha, Linus and his friends want to revive the old Javanese tradition of spiritualism. "They can draw," as Dagmar remarks, "on Siddhartha in their attempts at keeping alive, at least in religious and poetic communication, the old Javanese world that is changing beyond recognition as they look on impotently" (Barnouw 70). By describing the religious faiths of Imaduddin, Wahid, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, and Linus, Naipaul articulates the religious turmoil of Indonesia caused by fundamentalism in different ways.

Returning to Iran, Naipaul visualizes a peculiarly all pervasive sadness. He witnesses endless forms of separation and the wounds inflicted by the eight year war with Iraq. From his guide Mehrdad a university student, he learns about a general despair among the people. "Through his eyes," Naipaul comes to know, "how the nation's trauma has affected every area of life – personal, social, and economic" (Feder 147). The pervasive atmosphere of pain and suffering are also affirmed by his sister's frustration. This suffering and pain symbolize the failure of the Islamic revolution and its fundamentalist philosophy. This failure can also be marked by Naipaul's interaction with Mr. Parves and Mr. Jaffrey.

However, from the religious point of view the most important episode of the book is, relating to Abbas, who was trying to come to terms with his war
experiences. During war-time, he (Abbas) had intensely spiritual experience of omnipresent death. Dealing with the dead bodies was a sort of spiritual exercise. For it connected him with the departed people. Naipaul writes:

It was an intense spiritual moment, and it was heightened when he was washing the cartridge belts and harness straps of the dead men. That was one of the things he used to do at the front. Every day he used to go to the morgue – officially called Meradi, the place of ascension – and collect the equipment from about forty dead men. He would clean the equipment in the evening. There was a shortage of equipment at this time because so many men were involved in this big attack. There was also a shortage of shoes. Another thing he did during the day was to help unload the supply trucks when they came up to the front. He did that unloading with a lot of real: it was one reason why the soldiers didn’t send him back.

The cleaning of the equipment of the dead men was a spiritual exercise for him because he would think that the pieces he was cleaning belonged to men who had gone to a place which they didn’t quite know. And it was possible – Abbas’s words were ambiguous here – that he also meant that though the men didn’t know where they were going, they had gone there straight and with determination.

(Beyond Belief 203)

Even more interesting to Naipaul is Abbas’s story of a miraculous cure of his blindness caused by his head wound, at the shrine of Chirag, which is one of the most famous shrines of Iran. Abbas had made a bow at the shrine:

‘Allah, I accept whatever you wish, and I like whatever you like. But I cannot tell a lie to you. I need my eyes. If you give me back my eyes, I will use them to go back to the front.

After some time Abbas miraculously recovered his eyesight, Naipaul describes this recovery in his inimitable style:

At twelve Abbas left the shrine with the rest of the patients and went back to the hospital. At two the nurse came to his room; he was taking about twelve pills every six hours. As the nurse opened the door Abbas saw the light and shouted. Doctors and nurses ran
up. They saw that the clot on the retina had gone, and they didn’t let him sleep. They called other doctors to look. None of them believed that that kind of religious miracle could happen. Word got around. Something got into the papers. But Abbas was nervous of letting too much be known.

(Beyond Belief 205)

Abbas’s miraculous cure raises many questions in Naipaul’s mind, including the questions of faith in one’s religion. In order to find an appropriate answer, Naipaul visits the shrine some days later. However, Naipaul does not have the experience of Abbas, since he does not possess the same faith. Nevertheless, he has at least a fair understanding of Abbas’s spirituality. This understanding is possible only because of his Hindu background. Dagmar Barnouw comments, “Perhaps from his Hindu background, Naipaul did have some access to Abbas’s ‘treasure’ of spirituality as derived from extreme physical experience – understood, explained in relation to normality” (Barnouw 84). Naipaul himself acknowledges this background, when he explains the truth about the Chirag miracle:

And this was interesting to me because it showed how, even within the rigidities of a revealed faith, a feeling for the spiritual might prompt wonder; and science and the search for knowledge would have begun. It was like the understanding that had come to me some years before, in India, in the south of the country, of the ways in which certain brahmin families, priestly proponents of antique ritual and taboos, had in two generations in the twentieth century arrived at high science, made ready for that intellectual journey by the very complications and demands of their theology and its curious, shut-away purity.

(Beyond Belief 208-209)

This miracle leaves a deep impression on Naipaul’s mind, since it is different from other experiences. He finds a kinship with his Iranian friends.
“Abbas impressed Naipaul because he had insisted on finding his own way. But though his spirituality, different from the reigning religion, was his own, his search was shared by other Iranians who as young men had participated in the revolution and the war” (Barnouw 85).

While traveling to Pakistan, Naipaul observes the failure of Pakistan-experiment. The country which was meant to be the country of God, becomes the country of tyrants. However, as Naipaul finds, to the people of Pakistan theoretically, Islam is a complete way of life, being the source of every institution, social, political, or religious. Nevertheless, the state considered as Godhood becomes the state of political despotism which belittles its traditional culture as well spiritual heritage.

Obviously, Naipaul is quite impressed with the personal faith of a Pakistani who returns back to Islam, “hoping for his son’s success at school and for the afterlife for himself, another devoted to the ‘idea of sacrifice and service’” (Feder 136-137). But in his interaction with Pakistanis, Naipaul visualizes that Islam is well set for its transformation. At the same time, he shows his concern for the decay of the myth of Muslim brotherhood. By delineating sufferings of Indian Muslims in Pakistan, he exposes the claims made by the votaries of a Muslim state.

In Pakistan, Naipaul shows his concern for mohajirs like Salman, an intensely religious soul, who was brought up in a religious family. “Religion” writes Naipaul, “was part of the serenity of his childhood.” At the age of thirteen, Salman became acquainted with a new type of Islamic cult, the cult of mujahid
which promises Paradise for those who go to war against the infidels. In this way, he (Salman) becomes acquainted with the idea of *jihad* and its importance for a Muslim. Naipaul explains the germination of this idea in Salman in detail:

In this way Salman was introduced to the idea of *jihad*, holy war. It was a special Muslim idea. He explained it like this: 'In Christianity Christ died for all Christians. He can ensure heaven for them. In Islam Mohammed can only make a submission in your favour for being a follower of his. It is only Allah who makes the final decision on the merit won by good deeds. Nothing is greater, so far as goodness goes, than *jihad* in the name of Allah.' *Jihad* was not meant metaphorically. 'The word of the Koran is taken very literally. It is blasphemous even to think of it as an allegory. The Koran lays great store by *jihad*. It is one of the sayings of Mohammed – not in the Koran, it's one of the traditions – “If you see an un-Islamic practice you stop it by force. If you not possess the power to stop it, you condemn it verbally. If not that also, then you condemn it in your heart.” As far back as I remember I have known this. I think this tradition gives the Muslim licensee to act violently.

*(Beyond Belief* 327)

But Salman ultimately becomes disillusioned and gives up his beliefs in such a religion, which becomes an instrument of intolerance. Naipaul goes on to mention the stories of other young people who had been devout Muslims, but who are now threatened by the followers of their own religion. For them the partition, "once a cause for joy, had become like a wound." Unwelcome in Karachi they are now confronted with overt and covert barriers in their political life. Even after, half a century the descendants of Muslims from India are regarded as, "strangers... unrepresented, cheated, without power, had taken up arms against the state in a merciless guerrilla war" *(Beyond Belief* 325).

Interestingly, in the opinion of Naipaul, Pakistanis are busy in destroying the relics of the past. Though they zealously safeguard the graves of their
leaders, they expose the monuments of their distant ancestors for destruction.

Naipaul concludes his experience of the second Pakistani visit with an important observation:

Iqbal is buried in the grounds of the Shah Jehan mosque in Lahore; and soldiers watch his tomb. Rhetoric or sentimentality like that is invariably worrying; it hides things. And the tomb, with its Mogul motifs, would be a kind of artistic sacrilege if, just across the way, the great Mogul fort of Lahore (the emperor’s window there recorded in some of the finest Mogul pictures) wasn’t falling into dust; if, in that same city of Lahore, the Mogul Shalimar gardens and the tombs of the emperor Jehangir and his consort were not in absolute decay; if, going back four centuries, the delicately coloured tiled towers of the thirteenth-century tombs of Uch in Bahawalpur, one of the finest Islamic things in the subcontinent, were not half washed away; if going back further still, the land just around the Buddhist city of Taxila, known to Alexander the Great, and with once fabulous remains, wasn’t being literally quarried; if Pakistan, still pursuing imperialist Islamic fantasies, hadn’t been responsible for the final looting of the Buddhist treasures of Afghanistan.

In its short life Iqbal’s religious state, still half serf, still profoundly uneducated, mangling history in its school books as well, undoing the polity it was meant to serve, had shown itself dedicated only to the idea of the cultural desert here, with glory – of every kind – elsewhere.

(Beyond Belief 380-381)

In his second Malaysian visit, Naipaul finds Islam used as an instrument of grief, feeling of inadequacy, social rage, and racial hate. Like the fundamentalists in Pakistan, Malaysians, “believed that to follow the right rules was to restore the purity of the early Islamic way: the reorganization of the world would follow automatically on the rediscovery of the true faith” (Feder 137). However, this short of outrageous Islam leads Malaysians nowhere. They still remain hanging between the Western influence and the desire for old Islamic piety. This equivocal nature of Malaysians is affirmed by his interaction, with Shafi, who has not
changed at all during this interval. He still remains true to his early beliefs. Though most of his friends like Nasar have changed sides, Shafi stands firm, still believing that his countrymen are, "as a pastoral, tropical people...not commercially minded" (Beyond Belief 89). As Feder comments, "Naipaul’s depiction of Shafi as an idealistic young man in Among the Believers is so appealing that one grieves for his lonely adherence to a way of life that has passed, even as one cannot help admiring his fidelity to his convictions as he endures rejection by former friends" (Feder 156).

Shafi’s case is exemplary as he incorporates his nostalgia for village life in his religious view. Though a failure is business, he still clings to his old view of Islam as a way of life in practice. Naipaul takes up the case of another person, the playwright Syed Alwi, who does not benefit from the industrial boom of his country, but remains clinging to his religious conviction. His steadfastness is evident from his tribute of Syed Alwi to his mother:

‘She was the community. From her Malay upbringing, her Islamic upbringing, she provided him with the support that enabled him to have his two worlds. Without her he would have been thrown into the madhouse’ – the place of water-hoses and rice mixed with sand – ‘and he wouldn’t have lasted two years. ‘As it was, he lived in his two worlds for twenty-three years.’

(Beyond Belief 436-437)

Alwi’s mother stands for traditional Malay customs and values, loyalty, and respect for human beings. These values are cultivated by Alwi as well. They provide him sufficient inner strength to withstand the furies of change,
transcendent boom, financial collapse, and social upheaval. It is this Islam which finds Naipaul’s approval.

In nutshell, Naipaul unfolds the Islamic part of his religious vision in Among the Believers and Beyond Belief. In these books he incorporates his experience of two visits (1979 and 1995) to four Islamic countries Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Obviously, he visits these countries to assess the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism to the Western civilization. But in depth his intention is to examine his idea of Islam, framed early during his Trinidadian days and affirmed during his Indian visits. While reading this book one should never forget that Naipaul interprets his Islamic vision with a Hindu sensibility.

In Among the Believers, Naipaul begins with his experience of Shia fundamentalism in Iran focusing his attention on the revival of the ancient Shia spirit, its ambivalent attitude towards Western culture, modern science, and technology. While visiting Pakistan, Naipaul examines the claims of Pakistani fundamentalism, in shaping a modern Islamic state, and providing a way of life. In Malaysia, Naipaul finds Islam suspended between modern industrialization and the recovery of the original Islamic purity, innocence, and pastoral glory. In Indonesia, he describes Islamic fundamentalism, standing for complete Islamization by destroying the relics of the past. He also mentions the elements, which confront the fury of fundamentalism. In his second visit, Naipaul reaffirms his experiences of his first visit, analysing in detail the repercussions of fundamentalism, conversion, separation of histories, and the destruction of past relics.
In his book *Beyond Belief* he begins with the description of various religious trends represented by Imaduddin, Mr. Wahid, Dewi Founta Anwar, and Linus. While Imaduddin stands for fundamentalism the marriage of politics and religion, Mr. Wahid propagates a Sufi Islam, tolerant of other religions, respecting the old relics, and the separation of religion and politics. Dewi Founta Anwar is mindful of the ancient heritage as well the village culture. Going beyond all of them, Linus believes in a composite spirituality involving Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In Iran, Naipaul witnesses the failure of Shia revolution but he quite impressed with the Iranian spirituality exemplified by Abbas. In his journey to Pakistan, he becomes aware of the failure of the idea of Pakistan and Islam as a complete way of life, as he sees Muslims killing Muslims and indulging in the destruction of the past relics. In Malaysia he finds a confirmation of his view of the incapability of fundamentalist Islam to adjust to modern conditions. However, he appreciates the traditional Islam of Alwi’s mother, the Islam of values, transcending the industrial boom.
Chapter 5 – Endnotes


