CHAPTER 6
NAIPaul’S VISION OF COMPOSITE RELIGION

Indeed the religious vision of Naipaul is energized by a conflict between his Hindu rather Brahminic sensibility and Christianity, a conflict in which the balance seems to tilt in favour of the latter. However, it is only a half truth. Throughout his career, as discussed in the preceding chapters, Naipaul never forfeits his faith in his Brahminic roots. Whatsoever may be his compulsions of favouring Christianity, he does not stand for a single religion. Naipaul with all intents and purposes prefers a composite religion. His Trinidad experience persuades him that Hindu rituals have lost their meaning and as such their pristine purity cannot be preserved in an alien atmosphere. He also becomes conscious of the threat posed by the Creole culture under such circumstances. The only answer of which he can think of is a composite religion based on respect for all religions, their scriptures, rituals, and festivals. This kind of awareness is an important stage of an ongoing process of merger.

Merger is a historical necessity. As different races, or ethnic or religious groups come in contact with one another, they are bound to mingle and merge. This process can be marked in Asia as well as in the Continent. Recently, it is visible in the countries of the New-World. This phenomenon can be visualized in the American history as well. Quoting an excerpt from Crevecaeur the French husbandman, The American historian, Merle Curti states, “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, new in part because of that ‘strange
mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country,' but new also by reason of the fact that, having left behind all his ancient prejudices and manners, the immigrant had received 'new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.'

The initial stages of this process of mingling and merger can be marked in the Caribbean Islands as well. The colonization of the Caribbean Islands brings together many races of people, Europeans, Indians, and Africans. As they develop close connections, they synthesize their cultures to produce a new composite culture. For East Indians, the merger of different cultures becomes a necessity. Since, for some reason or the other the East Indians could not return to their motherland, they had to accept the Caribbean Island as their new home. Subsequently, they had to identify with their new homeland and merge with local people. Analysing the compulsions of the Indian inhabitants, Selwyn R. Cudjoe writes:

In 1917, at the end of indenture, the East Indians' attempt to maintain a separate identity was challenged severely. Feeling the pull of the dominant group and having to participate in the social and political activities of the countries caused increasing strains. The need to act collectively with the Africans in the newly emerging world of capitalism and the imperative that they accept this new land as their home became major concerns for most East Indians, who refused or were unable to return to their motherland. Faced with this new and complex situation in a perverse and alien environment, the East Indians, like Other Caribbean peoples before them, were forced to address the dual question of the problematic of being and the quest for meaning in their new environment.

Naipaul fully understands the predicaments of the East Indians in an alien country. He tremendously feels the importance of a composite culture and their
composite religion as a way of social and National integration, which is a pre-
condition for the development of the idea of nationhood and patriotism without
which any country, old or new, cannot survive. Naipaul unfolds the necessity for a
composite religion in his writings including The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of
Among the Believers, A Turn in the South, India: A Million Mutinies Now, and
Beyond Belief.

In his early novels, Naipaul not only paves the ground for a composite
culture but also presents its blue-print. To begin with Trinidad, as described in the
tourist brochures, is a “vibrant meeting-point of different races and cultures.”\(^3\) It
has a mixed population of Hindus, Muslims, Negroes, and Spaniards, following
different cultural and religious traditions. But its inhabitants eventually become
inclined to shed their religious differences and come to develop a mixed tradition.
For instance Ganesh, the protagonist of The Mystic Masseur, is “a cultural mix.”
Though a Hindu, he abandons his traditional ways and goes on to imbibe the spirit
of the Western culture. As Champa Rao Mohan writes, “[i]n the case of food
habits, we find that the staple is still rice or roti and dal and a certain fastidiousness
about food, which is typically Hindu, still survives. Yet, the Western alternatives
have also been adopted. Ganesh’s Hindu instincts rise and he feels nauseated to
bite into the cold egg-and-cress sandwich, which Mr. Stewart offers him.
However, the same Ganesh, has no such hesitations when Ramlogan offers him
fish with bread and butter.”\(^4\) In his profession as a mystic masseur, he weds his
Eastern spiritualism with the Western learning to cure Hector, who is tormented by a cloud. We can get an idea of his "cultural mix" from the following excerpt:

Shortly after twelve the boy, his mother and father arrived, in the same taxi as before. Ganesh, dressed once more in his Hindu garments, welcomed them in Hindi, and Leela interpreted, as arranged. They took off their shoes in the verandah and Ganesh led them all to the darkened bedroom, aromatic with camphor and incense, and lit only by the candle below the picture of Lakshmi on her lotus. Other pictures were barely visible in the semi-darkness: a stabbed and bleeding heart, a putative likeness of Christ, two or three crosses, and other designs of dubious significance.

Ganesh is not the only Hindu to change his stance. There are many others, who opt for a mixed religion. Pundit Dhaniram, one of the chief characters of The Suffrage of Elvira, also mixes his Hinduism with Christianity. Educated in a Missionary school, he develops a love for Christian hymns. Champa Rao Mohan states that Dhaniram has not only adopted these hymns but also English language:

It is interesting to note that pundit Dhaniram is educated at a Presbyterian school and sings hymns as well. He is even proud of his training in the Christian school because as he says, it makes him "see both sides." As far as the use of language is concerned, we note that the East Indians of multi-racial Elvira are as out of touch with Hindi as the East Indians portrayed in Masseur. Except for Dhaniram's invalid wife, no one else speaks the language (Mohan 39).

Besides Ganesh and Dhaniram, Biswas is another votary of the mixed culture. He rises against the dominant religion of Tulsi House which is well known for its strict observation of Hindu rituals Biswas even goes on to offend Tulsis. "[T]o spite the Tulsis, he joins the Aryans, a group of revisionist Hindu Missionaries from India, and proselytises for them by advocating girls' education, abolition of child marriage, caste system and idol worship. He preaches against all
the doctrines the Tulis hold dear. Mrs. Tulsi is particularly displeased because Owad, her younger son is trying to get into the Catholic College and she fears that Biswas’s involvement with the Aryans may create problems for Owad” (Mohan 62-63). It is surprising to find that Mrs. Tulsi the head of the family, who was so displeased with Owad and Biswas accepts with pleasure Shekhar’s marriage with a Presbyterian girl. Another surprising thing, which takes place in Tulsis House, is the celebration of Christmas every year with show and gaiety. Naipaul states:

On the morning of Christmas eve excitement was at its height, but before the afternoon was out had subsided so far that the displays had ceased to be magical, their gaiety became disorder, and the disorder could be seen to be superficial. So that before Christmas came, in the shop it was felt to be over. And throughout the afternoon attention turned more and more to the hall and kitchen where Sumati, the flogger, was in charge of the baking, and Shama, who had no recognized talents, was one of her many helpers. The smells from the kitchen had an added savour because, as always at Hanuman House, the food continued to be ordinary and bad up to the very day of a festival.

The Tulsi Store was closed, the toys left in darkness which would transform them into stock and the brothers-in-law prepared to leave Hanuman House for their families. As Mr. Biswas cycled through the night to Green Vale, he remembered he had not got presents for Savi and Anand. But they expected none from him; they knew they would find their presents in their stockings on Christmas morning.

After the collapse of Hanuman House, Tulsi who has been a staunch Hindu, throughout her life, succumbs to Creole culture and goes on to observe catholic rituals. Her “assimilation into the Creole culture is complete when Mrs. Tulsi starts sending Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic Church, puts a crucifix in her room and has pundit Tulsi’s grave cleaned for All Saint’s Day” (Mohan 69).
Interestingly, Tulsi has her incarnation in Aunt Gold Teeth, who also succumbs to the demands of a composite religion. Aunt Gold Teeth, childless, fat and gullible, flirts with Christianity. She is not deterred “from seeking out Christianity, a more powerful religion for curing her of her childless state. Ironically, her husband Ramprasad who is a Pundit takes ill in the course of her Christian phase.”

The story of “My Aunt Gold Teeth,” suggests that in Trinidad one finds a merger of not only different religions but also of their superstitions. The story is remarkable for the idea of God which Ganesh propounds in his interaction with the Aunt – one God appearing in many forms. This idea is crucial to a cosmopolitan religion. Let us reproduce Ganesh’s dialogue with Gold Teeth, in which he tells his client that there is only one God:

‘I have done a great wrong, Baba.’
‘What sort of wrong?’ he asked, and his tone indicated that Gold Teeth could do not wrong.
‘I have prayed to Christian things.’
And to Gold Teeth’s surprise, Ganesh chuckled benevolently.
‘And do you think God minds, daughter? There is only one God and different people pray to Him in different ways. It doesn’t matter how you pray, but God is pleased if you pray at all.’
‘So it is not because of me that my husband has fallen ill?’
‘No, to be sure, daughter.’

As a professional Ganesh has developed a composite religion in which he accommodates the beliefs of all religion:

In his professional capacity Ganesh was consulted by people of many faiths, and with the licence of the mystic he had exploited and commodiousness of Hinduism, and made room for all beliefs. In this way he had many clients, as he called them, many satisfied clients.

(A Flag on the Island 17)
Hindus are not the only ones who have been swept by the winds of change. There are Muslims as well. For instance, there is Lorkhoor who champions the cause of the unity of the races as well as religions. He pleads that this unity is a prerequisite for the liberation and identity of the people of Elvira. Though an unpopular figure, his utterances can be viewed as a clarion call for a composite religion. Naipaul begins the chapter entitled “Encounters” by stating that every house belonging whether to Hindus or Muslims or to Christians owns a Bible. Furthermore, Hindus and Muslims observe the Christian festival of Christmas and Easter. They are reciprocated by the Spaniards and the Negroes who celebrate the Hindu festival of Dipawali. They also show great respect for the Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. Likewise, everybody without exception celebrates the Muslim festival of “Hosein” or “Mohurram.” Evidently this statement, quoted earlier, provides us a blue-print of the composite culture in unambiguous terms. Obviously, Naipaul believes that a mixed culture is the only way of unity in diversity. It is the only adhesive to hold together a pluralistic society:

Thing were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, owned a Bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything, with greater awe. Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter. The Spaniards and some of the Negroes celebrated the Hindu festival of lights. Someone had told them that Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity, was being honoured; they placed small earthen lamps on their money-boxes and waited, as they said, for the money to breed. Everybody celebrated the Muslim festival of Hosein. In fact, when Elvira was done with religious festivals, there were few straight days left.
Interestingly, the merger of religions takes place on two levels, emotional and physical. The emotional merger surfaces in form of respect for the scriptures of various religions and the observation of the rituals and festivals of other religions. The physical merger assumes the form of social interaction like meetings and inter-religious marriages. As for religious books are concerned, we have already discussed, how people of Elvira have learnt to pay reverence to the Bible and the Holy books of Hindus and Muslims and how to observe rituals and important festivals of other religions. It is also a pleasant surprise to find Hindus assuming Christian names, Ganesh becoming G.R. Muir. We can cite the instances of Baksh’s children who besides their Muslim names have Christian names as well without caring for the confusion it causes among the people:

If it puzzled Harbans how a burly couple like Mr. and Mrs. Baksh could have a son like Foam, elongated and angular, he could see the stages Form must have gone through when he looked at the other Baksh boys: Iqbal, Herbert, Rafiq and Charles. (It was a concession the Bakshes made to their environment: they chose alternate Christian and Muslim names for their children.) The boys were small-boned and slight and looked as though they had been stretched on the rack. Their bellies were barely swollen. This physique better became the girls, Carol and Zilla; they looked slim and delicate.

(The Suffrage of Elvira 22)

The adoption of rituals by the followers of other religions surfaces every now and then. Interestingly, one of its most eloquent instances comes in Miss Blackie:

She was offended. She was a Roman Catholic and went to mass every morning, but she had seen the Hindu rites performed every day for many years and regarded them as inviolate as her own.

(A House for Mr. Biswas 133)
Inter-religious marriages, central to composite religious culture, go on to become the order of the day. Nelly’s flirtation with Foam, the elopement of Dhaniram’s daughter-in-law with Lorkhoor, and the marriage of Shekhar with Dorothy underscore the multi-dimensional process of religious merger. Another important element in the melting of religious traditions is conversion. In Naipaul, there are several instances of this practice, the most prominent being that of Choonilal, who after his conversion to Christianity, becomes Randolph. Choonilal embraces Christianity for his social-economic betterment but he does not succeed in his mission. As we find in his Islamic books, Naipaul does not approve of the practice of conversion whole-heartedly.

The idea of a composite religion, which Naipaul unfolds in his Trinidad experience, finds a more concrete form in his Islamic books, Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey and Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples. While describing his visits to Indonesia, Naipaul gives us an eloquent picture of the mixed religious practices, found especially in the Island of Java. Before his trip to Indonesia, Naipaul visits Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Even in these countries he witnesses the elements of cosmopolitanism which form one of the main planks of the composite religion. The cosmopolitan element in Iranian religion reminds him of the Arab glory of the past – “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.” However, this cosmopolitan spirit, Naipaul laments, is
crushed by the fundamentalist elements, which put political and social institutions under the control of religious authority. In Pakistan this cosmopolitan tradition suffers a complete eclipse, as Islamic fundamentalism engulfs every walk of human life.

However, in Malaysia and Indonesia Islamic fundamentalism is unable to crush the cosmopolitan tradition. No wonder that Naipaul finds in these countries the presence of mixed religion, “which had assimilated elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, so vital in preserving the history and traditions of Malaysia and Indonesia” (Feder 137). It is because Islam was not spread there by the invading armies. It was brought by Missionaries and travelers.

Islam went to south-east Asia as another religion of India. There was no Arab invasion, as in Sind; no systematic slaughter of the local warrior caste, no planting of Arab military colonies; no sharing out of loot, no sending back of treasure and slaves to a caliph in Iraq or Syria; no tribute, no taxes on unbelievers. There was no calamity, no overnight abrogation of a settled world-order. Islam spread as an idea - a Prophet, a divine revelation, heaven and hell, a divinely sanctioned code - and mingled with older ideas.¹¹

Before the arrival of Islam Malaysia and Indonesia had received Hinduism and Buddhism, which had established great civilizations and built great monuments:

IT WAS FROM India or the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent that religion went to south-east Asia. Hinduism and Buddhism went first. They quickened the great civilizations of Cambodia and Java, whose monuments - Angkor, Borobudur - are among the wonders of the world. These Indian religions, we are told, were not spread by armies or colonists, but by merchants and priests.

(Among the Believers 212)
Comparatively the Hindu and Buddhist influence was more prominent in Indonesia than in Malaysia. Naipaul writes:

There are a few Hinduized architectural remains in the far north, but no great Indianized civilization grew in Malaysia, as in Java or Cambodia. The land (though touched on the coast by Europeans) was more or less bypassed and left to the Malays until the last century.

(Among the Believers 213)

In Malaysia the Hindu-Buddhist influence is limited only to the village custom but in Indonesia it is much more pervasive. In Java, it has developed a great civilization which lasted for fourteen hundred years and it still survives 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).

Proud of the Buddhist temples of Borobudur and the Hindu temples of Prambanan, many Indonesians still cherish the richness of their ancient heritage. This heritage still makes its presence felt in Java and Bali. Naipaul travels to Yogyakarta with Umar Kayam pays a visit to the village of the poet Linus, a catholic. Linus’s village is a microcosm of the composite culture which faces threats from modern technology and globalization. But it still holds its own and continues to show how people can live a shared life.

Interestingly, Linus’s house itself is an emblem of composite culture. It reminds us of Ganesh’s hut in The Mystic Masseur that contained a number of the emblems of different religions:

Linus’s family house was of concrete, on low pillars, with a concrete floor. But it was of the Javanese pattern. There was a Catholic icon
above the inner door. And on a wall was a leather figure from the Javanese puppet theatre: the figure of the black Krishna, not the playful god of Hindu legend, but the Krishna of Java, the wise, farseeing man, and therefore a suitable figure for a poet’s house. In the bookcase were Linus’s books from school and the university, and also The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot, a gift from the BBC: Linus had won second prize in a poetry competition sponsored by the BBC Indonesian Service.

(Among the Believers 321)

With the presentation of Christianity and Islam as compliments to the old faiths and portraying the role of the Muslim koum, Naipaul gives us broad outlines of the composite religion. He observes that Christianity, in Indonesia supplements other religions. As Naipaul states, it “had come to Indonesia not long after Islam. It was the religion of the colonizing power; but like Islam, it had also come to the villagers as a complement to the old faiths” (Among the Believers 323). Elsewhere, Naipaul remarks that like Christianity, Islam also, “complemented the older religions” (Among the Believers 326).

As for koum, Naipaul finds in him, “a kind of successor to the Hindu priest.” And in the rituals, he performs, he (Naipaul) finds the survival of Hindu rituals. The koum performances include, “a birth, a funeral, an anniversary, or simply when a family wished to have a religious ceremony; and he performed then the salamatan ritual. This ritual had to do with the consecration of food and the distribution of the consecrated food” (Among the Believers 323-324). He has also to wash the dead bodies of the Muslims and shroud them for burial. Thus, “[i]n himself then, the Muslim koum combined the ritual duties of priest and untouchable. He embodied, and in an extraordinary way, this man of ritual, what had been preserved of the Hindu system of caste” (Among the Believers 324).
There can hardly be a better example of a composite religious tradition produced by the merger of Hinduism and Islam.

The composite religious tradition is exemplified in the form of the survival of Hindu stories. These stories are accepted by Muslims without any reservation. This tradition also survives in Java in the form of a common set of ideas: “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). As Umar tells Naipaul the story of the people of Prambanan provides us with a fine instance of the composite faith of its inhabitants. Prambanan is known for its ninth century temples which attract visitors from all over the world. The people coming from abroad evince keen interest in the puppet plays as well. Knowing fully well that these temples and puppet plays are based on the Hindu epics. At a time the people of Prambanan became inclined to declare their allegiance to Hinduism. However, they were frustrated in their attempt as they found no priest to teach them how to perform the Hindu rituals. The Balinese Hindu priests were not able to help them either. Hence, the people of the village had no option but to continue with their old composite religion:

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 Prambanan had returned to being what they had been people of a composite religion.

(Among the Believers 327)
Naipaul feels that Hinduism is a refined religion with rituals and a well-defined theology. But these things cannot be revived in a foreign atmosphere. However, the stories of its epics which have become a part of the human imagination, can be reworked and made relevant to modern consciousness. It is no wonder that these stories still survive in Java in the puppet plays. Naipaul writes:

The religion which at one end was the religion of unfettered awe was at the other end a religion or extraordinary refinement. The people who lived close to the spirits of the dead also possessed living epics that had become moral texts. The rituals and difficult theology of Hinduism couldn’t be re-established. But Hinduism had left Java its most human and literary side, its epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata; and the epics lived in the puppet plays, the wayang.

(Among the Believers 327-328)

Naipaul goes on to mark affinities that exist in the Hindu conception of salvation, the Buddhist notion of nirvana, and the Islamic idea of paradise. He also underscores a similar conception of reality prevalent in these religions. To quote Naipaul:

Salvation is the ultimate good, nirvana; it is to be achieved by the conquest of the senses — a way that is full of self-deceptions. And the Islamic idea of paradise fits easily into the Buddhist-Hindu dream of the life without worldly entanglement and stress. The Islamic idea of the omnipotent God merges into the more mystical Hindu concept of Wisnu, Vishnu, who, as Sri Mulyono says, is ‘Truth... Reality, the source of all things and all life.’

(Among the Believers 329)

However, this composite religion of which Islam is a part, is threatened by the new Missionary Islam. This new Islam is quite different from the old Islam of the koum. The new Islam is less religious and more political, for it asks its adherents to fight the Western culture. “This late twentieth century,” writes
Naipaul, “Islam appeared to raise political issues. But it had the flaw of its origins – the flaw that ran right through Islamic history: to the political issues it raised it offered no political or practical solution. It offered only the faith. It offered only the Prophet, who would settle everything – but who had ceased to exist. This political Islam was rage, anarchy” (Among the Believers 331).

To Naipaul the palace of Yogyakarta is the true monument of the composite culture or for that matter composite religion. However, he is unable to visit the palace. In a tone of utter dismay he writes:

So the royal palace of Yogyakarta remained unknown to me; its Buddhist mandala unexplored; the nine gateways that matched the nine orifices of the human body, the rooms that symbolized so many things, the trees that held such varied meanings; all the mingled Hindu-Buddhist-Muslim mysteries of kingship in Java, matching the wonder of the unique civilization.

(Among the Believers 332)

In this way, Naipaul gives us a precise picture of Javanese, owing their allegiance to a composite culture that embodies not only the fusion of the mysteries of Hindu-Buddhist-Muslim traditions but also brings together their central values, the values which inspired Indonesians to sustain their pride in their colonial days. “As Naipaul points out,” writes Dagmar Barnouw, “both Christianity, the religion of the colonizing power, and Islam, the formal faith of the people sustaining their pride under Dutch rule, have been complementary to the old faiths of the village.”

In his next Islamic book, Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples, Naipaul goes on to elaborate different threats posed to the
composite religion of Indonesians. The main threat, of course comes from Islamic fundamentalism, Islam, during the colonial period, “had been kept alive informally in colonial times, in simple village boarding schools, descended perhaps as an idea from Buddhist monasteries.” The threat, first of all seemed to come from these village boarding schools known as pesantren, which strove for the purity of Islam. Wahid an important political figure was also connected with them. However, this threat was not so serious.

With their connections, with the Buddhist monasteries and Sufism, and with the consciousness of their history, pesantrens actually stood for a religious co-existence, and accommodation of different ideas:

What he said explained much of what I felt about the pesantren. Before Islam they would have been Buddhist monasteries, supported by the people of the villages and in return reminding them of the eternal verities. In the early days of Islam here they would have remained spiritual places, Sufi centres. In the Dutch time they would have become Islamic schools. Later they would in addition have tried to become a more modern kind of school. Here as elsewhere in Indonesia, where Islam was comparatively recent, the various layers of history could still be easily perceived. But – this was my idea, not Mr. Wahid’s – the pesantren ran all the separate ideas together and created the kind of mishmash I had seen.

(Beyond Belief 28)

A threat of more serious nature comes from the fundamentalism of people like Imaduddin who are hell-bent to erase the imprint of any other religion on the Indonesian soil. Some of the followers of Islam who had been to Mecca and were influenced by Wahabi fundamentalism, were determined to purify Islam from the remnants of other faiths. To quote Naipaul:
In the independent kingdoms or sultanates of Sumatra, however, the effect of these journeys to Mecca had been more violent. Just as one hundred and fifty or sixty years later colonial students, often the first in their families to travel abroad for university degrees, were to go back home with borrowed ideas of revolution; so these Sumatran students and pilgrims in Mecca, influenced by Wahabi fundamentalism, and a little vain of their new knowledge, were to go back home determined to make the faith in Sumatra equal to the Wahabi faith in Mecca. They were determined to erase local errors, all the customs and ceremonies and earth reverences that carried the taint of the religions that had gone before: animism, Hinduism, Buddhism. There had followed religious wars for much of the century: it was what had drawn the Dutch in, at first to mediate or assist, and then to rule.

(Beyond Belief 54-55)

This staunch fundamentalism was perpetuated by the leaders like Imaduddin. These narrow minded leaders did not tolerate the monuments of other religions. They criticized their government for spending money on such relics of the past:

This was the missionary faith that Imaduddin had inherited. Java, rather than Sumatra, was rich in the monuments of the pagan past. But nothing outside or before the faith was to be acknowledged, not even a great Buddhist monument like Borobudur, one of the wonders of the world. One of Imaduddin's criticisms of the government in 1979 was that the Indonesian embassy in Canberra looked like a Hindu building. As for Borobudur, that was for the international community to look after.

(Beyond Belief 55)

Though under serious pressure, composite religion still has its supporters in such broad minded people as Dewi Fortuna Anwar and Agustinus Linus. Naipaul meets Dewi in Jakarta. She is a civil servant and a conservative Muslim. However, she does not believe in religious or cultural purity, and remains faithful to her composite cultural legacy. As Naipaul writes:
Religious of cultural purity is a fundamentalist fantasy. Perhaps only shut-away tribal communities can have strong and simple ideas of who they are. The rest of us are for the most part culturally mixed, in varying degrees, and everyone lives in his own way with his complexity. Some people manage things instinctively. Some like Dewi, can be self-aware at the same time. She valued all the many strands of her background. She said, ‘My life is rich because my different worlds converge.’

(Beyond Belief 66)

Although a daughter of liberal parents, she becomes a conservative because of her association with her village. Nevertheless, she cannot become strictly Islamic:

The years in the village had made her religious and conservative: she thought that her parents were too liberal, and sometimes she found her mother’s skirts too short and tight. In time her political attitudes were to change, but her personal values remained conservative; though, because of the matrilineal traditions of the Minangkabau, this conservatism gave her a degree of self-esteem as a woman that was not strictly Islamic.

(Beyond Belief 67)

Naipaul evinces a keen interest in Dewi’s career. He is impressed by her familiarity, as Lillian Feder states, “with and respect for the remnants of the pre-Islamic village ways of her ancestors” (Feder 145). At her suggestion, he visits her village in West Sumatra. Naipaul is overwhelmed with the antiquity of the plains of the region and is reminded of the world and the ancient Rome and its religious traditions. His imagination goes to a period in which religious traditions of Europe and Asia merged. Elaborating this point Feder writes, “For Naipaul the religious traditions of ancient Rome and of pre-Islamic Asia merge to illuminate the very nature of the sacred, ‘the wonder of the site and the wonder of the water bubbling up from the earth for centuries.’ For the unbeliever this evocation of the ancient
past is a spiritual bond with those who from time immemorial have acknowledged the mystery of natural and human life. Still, he is aware that Muslim visitors to this place who greet each other with ‘worship the god’ would know ‘with one part of their minds that he salutation was idolatrous.’ The nearby mosque was intended ‘not to honour or claim the sacredness of the place, but to triumph over it... The sacred places of the Muslim faith...were in another country.’ Yet it was, after all, Dewi, the conservative Muslim, who had sent him to her childhood home when the taboos of her clan and their sacred places endure” (Feder 145-146).

Naipaul goes on to lament how in Indonesia the relics of the Hindu and Buddhist past are being swallowed up along with the, “religions linked to the earth and animals and the deities of a particular place or tribe” (Beyond Belief 71). He becomes painfully conscious of a conversion of a different kind in Indonesia, a conversion not of the individuals but of the nation and its culture as a whole. Surprisingly, this conversion occurs, “when people have no idea of themselves, and have no means of understanding or retrieving their past” (Beyond Belief 72).

To Naipaul yet another eloquent adherent of the shared culture is Linus the Roman Catholic poet of Yogyakarta. He symbolizes, “the competition between the two great revealed religions for the soul of the half-converted, colonised country that had lost touch with its own beliefs, its own wholeness” (Beyond Belief 85). Linus’s mind is energized by a composite religion. Although the son of Catholic Christian he still cherishes mixed rituals. He loves Christianity because it is so near Javanism which keeps alive the tradition of Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism. As Linus tells Naipaul:
'Here even when we became Christians we continued with our old customs. Taking flowers to the cemetery, praying to the spirits of our ancestors. When someone dies even today in our Christian community we have mixed rituals. The ceremonies three days after the death, seven days, forty days, a hundred days, one year, two years, a thousand days.' Because of his father these death ceremonies would have been on Linus's mind.

He continues:

Christianity is important because it teaches you to love somebody as you love yourself. It means teaching us to become tender persons, not wild or aggressive persons. In Javanism also we have the concept of restraint. It is easy therefore for Javanese people to embrace Christ's teaching.

(Beyond Belief 89)

Linus goes on to tell Naipaul about the Javanised Hindu epics and Semar, "a god turned into a man, always supporting the good people." Linus, besides Semar also has the mascot of the Black Krishna on the wall of his house:

Not the playful Krishna of India, stealing the housewife's freshly churned butter and hiding the clothes of the milkmaids while they swam in the river; but the Black Krishna of Java, a figure of wisdom. That Krishna would have been a sufficient protector of a man starting out as a poet. Now, in a time of deeper grief and need, Semar – the man-god who helped the good – was a more appropriate divinity.

(Beyond Belief 90)

The Hindu art especially the art of dancing and story telling is kept alive by Dalangs of Indonesia "the puppeteers, the story-tellers" (Beyond Belief 90). The Javanese composite religion observes customs which are common to Christians and Muslims. One of such customs is circumcision. In an effort to explore the roots of this custom, Naipaul states:

I know from the Old Testament that the prophet Musa introduced this custom, and Musa is Jewish. Jewish in Indonesian is "Jahudi",

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and circumcision is jahudi-sasi. I wanted to make a historical-cultural point. To make for a better festival. I wasn't touching the Muslim custom only, because Christians here also practise circumcision. Today it's not only religious thing, but a health precaution.

(Beyond Belief 91)

Linus is greatly upset by the aggressiveness of Muslims. The younger Muslims question the especial duties of the koum, who is responsible for the burial of the dead, and for leading the community in prayer on certain ritual occasions. The koum is a representative figure linked with as much as Islam as with Hinduism and Christianity. Naipaul says:

But most upsetting to Linus was the change in the function of the village koum. The koum had been special, with special duties. He was Muslim, but he carried over many of the old Javanist ways. He was the man who was called in to wash and bury the dead. He was also the man who on certain ritual occasions informally led the community in prayer. It was possible to see in the koum an old outcast. Hindu figure, with the burial duties of the untouchable. And — just as the early Christians used the crucifixion and the cross, the centuries — old Roman punishment of everyday criminals, as the most moving symbol of human pain and redemption — so it was possible here to see how the early Muslims looking for converts, might have used this outcast to do a karate throw on the long-established faith: the washer and burier of the dead was to lead the community of the new faith in prayer: the untouchable, at one bound, scaled the caste pyramid and became the equivalent of a priest.

(Beyond Belief 92-93)

For Linus, the koum of his village is an embodiment of Javanese composite culture, exemplified by his love of the puppet plays which demonstrated the mixture of Hinduism and Javanese culture. However, he becomes a nonentity. After his death, his son is not required to lead especial prayers. While Linus’s father dies, the koum’s son comes to pray with Christians:
When my father died we asked the son of the koum to pray with us. The Christian leader led the prayers, and the koum and others, non-Catholics, were asked to pray for my father in their own way. This is the way of tolerance and equilibrium in relations in the village.

(Beyond Belief 93)

But this composite culture, as Linus tells Naipaul, is on the verge of extinction like many, “Hindu temples or Buddha temples” which were “buried by eruptions of Merapi a thousand years ago and also two thousand and fifty years ago. Merapi, the active volcano of the region” (Beyond Belief 93).

However, the ghosts of the composite culture haunt as ever in the consciousness of even those who have completely buried in their minds the living legends of their past. These ghosts appear in forms of myths and stories which they have Islamized. In his encounter with Budhi who runs a software company with a partner, Naipaul comes to know about a Jain story completely Islamised. Budhi tells Naipaul the story of Kali Jaga, the disciple of Sunnan Bonang, one of the nine teachers of Islam in Indonesia. Jaga after his conversion began to preach Islam to the people. However, he “found it hard to preach to the people, who were Hindus. So he stuck as much as he could to Hindu stories and ceremonies, but changed the words. Instead of the Hindu mantras he recited the Koran” (Beyond Belief 140). However, the story adopted by Muslims, really belongs to Jainism.

To quote Naipaul:

The figure of Kali Jaga, covered by vines, but loyal to his duty, is a magical and simplified version of the Hindu-Jain saint. Gomateshvara, meditating on the infinite. The most spectacular rendering of the vine-wrapped Gomateshvara is a 57-foot free-standing nude statue at Sravana Belgola in the Southern Indian state of Karnataka. It dates from the tenth century and still looks new. At
the statue's feet, disturbingly, as if in a further testing of the saint, real rats run about. It was strange to find him in this fifteenth-century Javanese story, sitting on a river bank with a quite different purpose.

(Beyond Belief 140)

Such stories are still the order of the day in Indonesia. The people of the country continue not only to observe rituals which are an amalgamation of many religious traditions but also retain names which closely resemble the Hindu names, popular in Hindu epics. Naipaul wants to say that in spite of conversion, the imprints of the past legacies cannot be erased. The mind continues to be dominated by the rhythms of the soil as well as of its history. If a new religious tradition invades a country, it has to acclimatize itself, to the new environment by assimilating its customs and manners.

This process of acclimatization can be witnessed in the Goan Christianity, described in India: A Million Mutinies Now. When Christianity comes to Goa, it deserts its old form and adopts a pronounced Hindu form in India. The infant Jesus is transformed into a Hindu God, endowed with tremendous healing power. Hence, Christianity which hates idolatry is converted into a religion of idolaters. In a sardonic tone, Naipaul comments:

Haters of idolatry, haters of all that was not the true faith, establishers in Goa of the Inquisition and the burning of heretics, levellers of Hindu temples, the Portuguese had created in Goa something of a New-World emptiness, like the Spaniards in Mexico. They had created in India something not of India, a simplicity, something where the Indian past had been abolished. And after 450 years all they had left behind in this emptiness and simplicity was their religion, their language (without a literature), their names, a Latin-like colonial population, and this cult, from their cathedral, of the Image of the Infant Jesus.¹⁴
Naipaul’s comments notwithstanding, the Goan community adheres to a common culture in which Hinduism and Christianity merge to assume a new form.

We can conclude our discussion with the remark that Naipaul in his heart of hearts believes in the unity of religions. Even though a professed atheist, his Brahminic streak enables him to arrive at the central truth of all religions. He realizes this truth while describing the life and career of Raja of Mamudabad. “His soul,” Naipaul writes, “has a rare depth, which took only a Muslim way of fulfilment, born a Muslim. Soul is neither Muslim, nor Hindu, nor any community whatsoever, although it can take the Hindu way or Muslim way or Christian way or any other way of fulfilment. This happens to Amir’s father. His Muslim way of seeking fulfilment meets with a thrashing and reveals itself as much as it can.”

This statement provides us with the keynote of Naipaul’s composite culture.

To summarize, Naipaul’s religious vision conforms exclusively to neither Hinduism nor Islam nor Christianity nor to any other tradition but to a composite religion. He provides us with a blue-print of a syncretic religious consciousness. He gives this blue print in The Suffrage of Elvira. In the novel he portrays a crazy community in which every family owns a copy of the Bible and observes important festivals of all religions. Furthermore, in his novels he introduces characters who serve as the models of composite culture. Ganesh in The Mystic Masseur, and “My Aunt Gold Teeth,” Dhaniram in The Suffrage of Elvira and Mr. Biswas as well as Tulsi (in her later life) in A House for Mr. Biswas is eloquent adherents of the composite religion.
Naipaul produces a full perspective of his religious vision in his later books especially in *Among the Believers*, *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, *Beyond Belief*. In his visit to Indonesia, as described in *Among the Believers*, he finds a model of the composite religion, developed after a fusion of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and native religions. He observes how the Hindu idea of salvation, the Buddhist idea of nirvana, the Muslim idea of paradise converge, and how the stories of the Hindu epics capture popular imagination. Naipaul goes on to describe how the Indonesians are proud of their old heritage especially of the temples of Borobudur and Prambanan. Naipaul projects Linus and the people of Prambanan as the best exponents of this mixed religion.

In his next book *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul goes on to deal with various threats to the composite culture. He mentions the fundamentalist like Imaduddin who want to erase every trace of Hinduism, Buddhism, and old religions. But he finds that in Indonesia there are also people like Mr. Wahid, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, Augustius Linus who are still eager to retain their old cultural identity. Naipaul tells us that the composite culture continues to surface in the form of rituals, customs, and myths.

In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul articulates how a religion acclimatizing itself to the environment of an alien land assumes a composite form. In sarcastic tone, he tells us how Christianity becomes a religion of idolaters, worshiping the Infant Jesus. Interestingly, Naipaul sounds the keynote of the composite culture by pleading the unity of all religions.
Chapter 6 – Endnotes


