CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, the living legend of the literary realm, is undoubtedly one of the most prominent interpreters of the twentieth century consciousness. Although a man of cosmopolitan mentality, evincing a keen interest in everything existing under the sun, he mainly concentrates on the sad plight of the so called half-made societies of the Third World, living mostly in Asia, Africa, and America. Naipaul prefers to assume the role of a chronicler for writing “suppressed histories” in an impartial, dispassionate, and objective manner. Using his great perceptive powers, he gives us an “incorruptible scrutiny” of half-made societies. Naturally for his tremendous efforts, Naipaul was honoured with world’s highest literary award, the Nobel Prize in 2001.¹

In his “incorruptible scrutiny,” Naipaul gives full coverage to every aspect of the cultures of the half-made societies. He considers their history, their social customs, and manners. Since religion is an essential ingredient of culture, he goes on to give an account of their religious beliefs, rites, and rituals and their roles in shaping the life of the people who observe them. But in view of his professed atheism and condemnation of “all forms of religion as stifling, sentimentally seduced by the past, irrational, and antiquated,”² his religious vision becomes a little problematic. For this reason his vision can hardly be interpreter in orthodox terms.
To begin with, religion is an essential ingredient of social life. It is, what William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt phrase as, “a cultural universal.” No society can exist without it. All societies whether Western or Eastern need a religious system to sustain their values and to solve their human social and psychological problems. Their survival depends on the dynamism of their religious institutions which energize their beliefs and hold together their social structure. However, such a complex phenomenon, central as much to the primitive societies as to the modern ones, cannot be defined in precise terms. Centuries of the use or rather the misuse of the term ‘religion’ has made its connotation vague. Nevertheless, for a proper understanding of Naipaul’s religious vision we have no option but to develop at least a working definition of religion as a term and as a concept. Furthermore, as Naipaul’s consciousness embodies the legacies of two different cultural realms, the Occidental and the Oriental, we have to take into account their views on such a subject of paradoxical nature.

Etymologically the English word “religion” comes from the Middle English word “relligoun,” a derivation from the Old French term “religion,” which has its origin in the Latin term “religo,” meaning “good faith” and “ritual,” or another Latin term “religare,” meaning “to tie fast,” or bind together. In its extended form “religare” means “to bind back, implying obligation” or “to select, distinguish among various elements for the choosing of the best, ponder.”

Obviously in the beginning the term had a simple connotation, as it meant only such things as to tie individuals to their groups. Items of faith as well as rituals are the things that tie the individual with the society he lives in. With the
passage of time more items were added and religion came to stand for all the
central values which were meant to maintain the social fabric. Since these central
values pertained to every subject, religion assumed a multifaceted character. No
wonder that Kile Jones defines religion in multidimensional terms:

    “It is apparent that religion can be seen as a theological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and psychological phenomenon of human kind. To limit religion to only one of these categories is to miss its multifaceted nature and lose out on the complete definition” (http://www.religioustolerance.org).

From the theological point of view religion entails belief in God, gods and
goddesses or supernatural agencies, responsible for the creation of the universe. It
also entails belief in scriptures and devotional institutions. Theological aspect can
take two forms the theistic and the non-theistic. The term theistic has wide
connotation. It means the belief in a personal God as well as the expression of
worship. Much at the same time it envisages a particular system of faith and
worship. As against this the non-theistic forms have no such beliefs or faith in
personal God or gods or supernatural agencies. Non-theistic forms have a strong
belief in rationalism or in the power of intellect and scientific culture. These forms
include all atheistic and agnostic traditions extending from Buddhism to the so-
called modern substitutes of religion like Humanism and Logical Positivisms.

In an extended form, the theological aspect of religion subsumes the
spiritual and the sacred aspects as well. Paul Connelly defines religion as “an
attempt to represent the order, beliefs, feelings, imaginings and actions that arise in
response to direct experience of the sacred and the spiritual”
He defines the sacred as "a mysterious manifestation of power and presence that is experienced as both primordial and transformative" (http://www.religioustolerance.org). He defines spiritual as "a perception of the commonality of mindfulness in the world that shifts the boundaries between self and other, producing a sense of the union of purposes of self and other in confronting the existential questions of life, and providing a mediation of the challenge-response interaction between self and other, one and many, that underlies existential questions" (http://www.religioustolerance.org). The sacred is interpreted not only in relation to the spiritual but also in contrast to the profane and the secular.

Philosophically, religion entails the rational basis of human beliefs, a philosophy of life as well as a world-vision. William James speaks of religion as a belief in an unseen order and the need for our adjustment with that order. A.N. Whitehead, while expressing his views about religion, emphasizes its role in negotiating the human condition of solitariness or alienation. The Existentialists also stress the value of religion in solving the problems of human existence. George Hegel considers religion in terms of the knowledge of the finite minds about its relationship with the absolute or the infinite mind. The philosophical aspect of religion includes the ethical and even the cosmological aspects as well. No wonder to Webster's New World Dictionary religion defines it as a specific system of belief and worship which subsumes an ethical code and a philosophy. Belief and worship, both presuppose deity or deities and the ethical code entails
social behaviour or guidelines to direct individual’s behaviour towards other persons.

From the anthropological angle, religion pertains to beliefs and practices which emerge in the form of symbols, myths, and rituals. Influenced by the Darwinian concept of biological evolution, anthropologists treat religion in terms of social development and also lay emphasis on its functional aspect. They evaluate the part played by religion at various stages of human civilization and in the creation of myths, rituals, and symbols that characterize our social life. The anthropologists keenly study even the role of magic in the development of the lower forms of religious activity concerned with witchcraft and sorcery. The anthropological angle surfaces in the works of such early twentieth century scholars as Sir Edward B. Taylor, William Robertson Smith, Andrew Lang, Sir James Frazer, and R.R. Marett. Later on this point of view appears in Wilhelm Schmidt, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown. All of them especially Malinowski and Brown, investigate the role of religion in the life of individuals and social groups.

The sociological point of view of religion intervenes between the two aspects of anthropological angle namely the origins and the functions of religion. In this regard there are two groups of sociologists. The first group led by Emile Durkheim, treats religion as “an integral part of society” (Lessa and Vogt 2). Durkheim is deeply interested in the question of the origin of religious emotion. The second group led by Max Weber is more interested in relationship between religious and economic institutions or precisely exploring the influence of religious
system on economic system and vice-versa. Another important sociologist of this group is Evans-Pritchard who evaluates the role of witchcraft in the explanation of unfortunate events. Weber’s influence is also visible in Talcott Parsons who considers the role of uncontrollable events. Parsons views are all the more important for his synthetic approach.

The psychological point of view spearheaded by Sigmund Freud, underscores the role of the unconscious in the development of the individual and social motivation. In his psychoanalysis, Freud examines “the nature of religion, especially the relationship of religious thought and emotions to unconscious motivation and the treatment of religion as a projective system” (Lessa and Vogt 2). Furthermore the great psychologist also deals with “the origin of the incest taboo in Totem and Taboo” (Lessa and Vagt 2). Freud’s work is continued by Geza Roheim and Bruno Bettelheim.

Obviously a precise definition of religion will have to incorporate elements central to theological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and psychological perspectives of religion. However, there is no such single definition. In this case we have to recall Talcott Parson’s definition of the term followed by a discussion of its central points: To quote him:

A religion we will define as a set of beliefs, practices and institutions which men have evolved in various societies, so far as they can be understood, as responses to those aspects of their life and situation which are believed not in the empirical-instrumental sense to be rationally understandable and/or controllable, and to which they attach a significance which includes some kind of reference to the relevant actions and events to man’s conception of the existence of a ‘supernatural’ order which is conceived and felt to have a fundamental bearing on man’s position in the universe and the values
which give meaning to his fate as an individual and his relations to his fellows (Lessa and Vogt 129).

In his attempt to define religion, Parsons highlights religion as a set of beliefs understood in terms like supernatural, sacred, and the specific. To him religion is a system of expressive symbols, objects, acts, persons etc. Besides it is a set of more or less definitely prescribed activities. It involves a sense of moral community and the intimate connection between man’s relation to the supernatural world and with his moral values. We can substantiate Parsons’ views with those of Paul Connelly who defines religion as an attempt to define the sacred and the spiritual and as a process of creating meaning. In a sense religion is also a faith and a feeling. However, we should not forget the negative definitions of religion, made current by Marxists who define religion as an opiate or as a sign. We can also remember that some scholars go on to define religion as a cloak of wealthy persons or an even as a tool of exploitation.

Coming to the Oriental point of view religion in the East, especially in India is dharma, a term which comes from the Sanskrit root dhri which means to hold. According to Swami Nirvedananda, “[e]verything in the universe has its dharma.” Its existence depends on the observation of dharma. Interestingly dharma is not the exclusive property of the human beings. Natural objects also have dharma of their own. For instance, the dharma of fire is to burn. The dharma of inanimate objects is inertness. Likewise “[m]an also has an essential nature that upholds his existence as something distinct from the rest of creation. And this must be the dharma of man, that is, manava dharma” (Nirvedananda 17). Manifestly the
Indian view of religion has much wider connotation than the view held by the Western theologians, since it includes in it not only the human world but also the non-human worlds.

The Indian view of religion is also inclusive. "Religion," writes Radhakrishnan, "has been identified with feeling, emotion and sentiment, instinct, cult and ritual, perception, belief and faith and these views are right in what they affirm, though wrong in what they deny." In the opinion of Radhakrishnan religion is also an instrument of social activities. "[It] has been used from the beginning for carrying on the social organisation and conserving the secular values, for religious sanctions seem to be more effective for keeping men loyal and law-abiding than prisons and police courts" (Radhakrishnan, An Idealist View 35).

Religion is the device to give an emotional stimulus to the beneficent activities. In his book Eastern Religions and Western Thoughts, Radhakrishnan states that it provides man with "a faith and a way of life, a creed and a community, and thus restore the broken relationship between him and the spiritual world and the human world around." Interestingly Radhakrishnan visualizes religion as "the conquest of fear, the antidote to failure and death" (Radhakrishnan Eastern 44).

Significantly, the Indian religions are equally attentive to the ethical aspect of human life. Hindu religion is the only religion which has an elaborate code of social conduct for entire life. It conceives of human life in terms of four stages of life designated as states of brahmacharya, grahastha, vanprahastha, and sanyasa. It assigns different types of values for different stages, namely dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. Dhrama refers to one's noble calling, whereas artha stands for desire
for wealth. Likewise kama stands for full-blooded physical enjoyments and moksha for liberation or for renunciation. Hence in India religion is related not only to the worship of the divine being or something concerned with rituals, myths, and symbols but also to a much higher notion, which embodies the most defining values of human life.

Other Oriental religions, like Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism also treat religion as an integral part of social life. They have equal interest in terrestrial as well as celestial experience. They regard life as “one of harmony with both the natural and human orders, a submersion of individuality in an organic relationship and an inwardly experienced oneness with them.” In the same vein, Buddhism believes in an indefinable, non personal, absolute source of dimension that can be experienced as the depth of human inwardness. That is to say that Eastern religions have a firm faith in man’s oneness with the environment. Evidently, their position is monistic that seeks transcendent reality within oneself.

Obviously there is a radical difference between the Occidental and Oriental visions. They appear like two currents drifting in opposite directions, the former towards materialism and the latter towards spiritualism. However, it is not the whole truth. In our view the religions of both the worlds tread the same path which fuses the terrestrial and celestial interests. For both of them religion offers a vision of cosmic unity, a way of life, and an adhesive power that binds together and that serves as an anchor and steadies the boat of life in the turmoil of the world. It has countless resources at its command to sustain human life, deities to worship, churches to pray, scriptures to read, rites, rituals, myths, and legends to
observe, festivals to celebrate and above all symbols to understand their world and their place in it. It has an ethical code to organize man’s social life, social and psychological modes to solve the problems of existence. Moreover it has a relevant rationale to prop up the scientific culture that threatens the existence of old forms of religion. These are precisely the features that characterize Naipaul’s conception of religion.

Naipaul, in spite of his professed atheism, has some specific and well defined notions of religion. But his notions are neither exclusively Western nor Eastern or Indian. Neither does he go exclusively for the higher forms of religion, concerned with mystical experience nor for its lower forms, dealing with occult practices. His approach is somewhat existential. Interestingly Naipaul relates religion with the totality of human experience. For him religion is not so much concerned with spiritualism as with the social and political problems. At the same time, he believes, it is closely related to history, inspiring human beings to pursue the past of their country in a religious spirit for sustaining their social institutions. Eventually Naipaul’s vision has four dimensions, Hindu, Islamic, Christian, and composite. Nevertheless, Naipaul feels the charm and beauty of Hindu or Brahminical rituals and partly experiences their transporting quality. At the same time, Naipaul underscores the importance of Islam and Christianity as the way of life and the relevance and need for a composite religion in the modern pluralistic societies. However, throughout his discussion, Naipual maintains a secular stance, with atheistic lineaments.
As for Naipaul’s atheistic pretensions, let us concede that he never has been an atheist in the strict sense of the term. Indeed he condemns religion, but condemns only its sentimental, irrational, and outdated forms. He criticises religious rituals but not because they lack intrinsic values but because the adherents of these values do not care to explain their rational basis. He condemns them because they are long, monotonous, and tedious. Giving vent to his disapproval of religious ceremonies, he writes:

I came of a family that abounded with pundits. But I had been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long and the food came only at the end. I did not understand the language – it was as if our elders expected that our understanding would be instinctive – and no one explained the prayers or the ritual. One ceremony was like another. The images didn’t interest me; I never sought to learn their significance. So it happened that, though growing up in an orthodox family, I remained almost totally ignorant of Hinduism.\(^9\)

Obviously Naipaul does not like these ceremonies, as they are too long and are in a language which he does not understand. He finds them boring, because they lack variety. However, this repulsion for religion has some other reasons that are rooted in his mental make up. He does not believe in rituals for that matter in magic, and myth, for they involve a belief in fate, which clashes with the idea of human freedom. As a staunch adherent of freedom it is hardly possible for him to accept anything that goes against his world vision.

Significantly, even while criticising rituals, Naipaul is not against all rituals. Rather he takes a keen interest in rituals that are relevant to the new environment and that can be a little fascinating. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul gives us a
graphic description of kattha, arranged by his family, the kattha that had captured his imagination:

My grandmother wished to have a kattha said, and she wished to have it said under a pipal tree. There was only one pipal tree in the island, it was in the Botanical Gardens. Permission was applied for. To my amazement it was given; and one Sunday morning we all sat under the pipal tree, botanically labelled, and the pundit read. He crackling sacrificial fire was scented with pitchpine, brown sugar and ghee; bells were rung, gongs struck, conchshells blown. We attracted the silent interest of a small mixed crowd of morning strollers and the proselytizing attentions of a Seventh Day Adventist. It was a scene of pure pastoral: aryan ritual, of another continent and age, a few hundred yards from the governor’s house.

(An Area of Darkness 34)

Naipaul makes a tremendous effort to adapt and adjust Hindu rituals and myths to an alien atmosphere. The most specific instance of this adjustment or adaptability can be found in his creative transformation of the Indian classics. It is interesting to see how Naipaul goes on to modify the teachings of the Gita in The Mystic Masseur. Besides he goes on to invert and distort the Ramayana in A House for Mr. Biswas. Obviously Naipaul is prepared to accept those Indian books, rites, and rituals which are made relevant to the Trinidadian environment.

Reservations notwithstanding, Naipaul never seriously questions the importance of religious ceremony, rituals or for that matter religion in human life. As his uncle contends, his “denial is an admissible type of Hinduism” (An Area of Darkness 35). He rejects only that form of Hinduism which differentiates people, which believes in caste-system, and which is noted for uncleanness. But the Brahminical Hinduism which stands for values begins to take roots very early in
his life. According to Sudha Rai, “Naipaul himself is amazed that the Hindu base of his childhood and youth could continue intact in the diversified culture of Trinidad. A strong, inviolate Hindu culture lives in the very heart of the clash of several ethnic groups in the Trinidad of Naipaul’s growing years.”

Acknowledging this fact Naipaul himself states:

That this world should have existed at all, even in the consciousness of a child, is to me a marvel; as it is a marvel that we should have accepted the separateness of our two worlds and seen no incongruity in their juxtaposition.

(An Area of Darkness 38)

• Obviously Naipaul does not find fault with all religious forms. He criticizes only the forms which are outdated which are detrimental to human progress. But for other forms he is quite positive. In his monumental work A House for Mr. Biswas, he is quite alive to religious traditions. He expresses his sorrow to the neglect of the traditional religion and is quite concerned for the corrosion of the Hindu traditional customs and beliefs. To quote Maureen Warner Lewis:

The religious ambiguity and syncretism and, in some cases, even neglect of traditional religion, is one of the earliest aspects of cultural confrontation with which Naipaul deals in his novel. And he progressively shows the sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, in which the western-oriented Creole culture of Trinidad corrodes Hindu traditional customs and beliefs, and the shifting of attitudes and psychological bewilderment this produces.11

However, Naipaul finds fault with all theoretical forms of religion – the forms that deal with abstract problems which have a very thin connection with actual life. The form in which he evinces keen interest is a form of applied religion or religion in practice that is dynamic or developing and that includes new
facts of human experience. Though a secularist; he does not hesitate to appreciate the role of religion in the societies in which it is mixed with politics. In his journey to the South, he becomes interested in, “the versatility of religion in the South and the improbable alliances it sustains” (Nixon 164). He keenly observes the alignment of politics and religion. He finds how the Christian fundamentalism in the South weds politics with religion. Naipaul states:

The past transformed, lifted above the actual history, and given an almost religious symbolism: political faith and religious faith running into one. I had been told that the conservatives of North Carolina spoke in code. The code could sometimes be transparent: “Tobacco Is a Way of Life” being the small farmer’s plea for government money. But in this flat land of small fields and small ruins there were also certain emotions that were too deep for words.¹²

Evidently Naipaul’s religious vision is not so much entrenched in books as in real experience. Though a well-read man in the nuances of religious literature, he prefers a religion which is attuned to the strains of actual life. Influenced by his reading of Albest-Comus and Jean Paul Satre, he cultivates an existential view of life. But overcoming the existential rejection of religion, he goes on to develop a religious view which is relevant to modern human condition. Naipaul frames his religious vision in view of the religious pluralism of his country. His modified Hinduism is framed in confrontation with Islam and Christianity.

For all intents and purposes Naipaul’s religious vision develops under the shadow of Christianity which confronts and questions his Hindu beliefs. His Brahminical sensibility which has its roots in his Trinidadian experience is seriously undermined by the Christian traditions. He gives an account of this clash
in most of his early books. An idea of this clash can be obtained from the following statement of Mulk Raj Anand in *Apology for Heroism*:

To me the whole presumption about man being born in sin, which lay at the root of Christian ethics, seemed obnoxious. For whatever criticism may be levelled against the Vedantic Absolute, who is above all human considerations of morality, there is in the Hindu and, particularly, in the Buddhist view, an insistence on light and knowledge as against the Christian insistence on darkness and sin. Guatama became “the enlightened one” when he attained the highest state, whereas from the start Christianity seemed to condemn human beings to an abject and ignominious position.\(^{13}\)

As Anand pleads the Indian or for that matter an East Indian, is never prepared to accept the sinful nature of human condition. He is not prepared to relinquish his beliefs in the Vedantic, Absolute either. Much of Naipaul’s work are full of such conflicts. “Although,” writes Selwyn R. Cudjoe, “Naipaul ultimately privileged the Christian concept of the world, the conflicting demands of both conceptions subtend his work.”\(^{14}\)

Naipaul’s vision is conditioned by yet another conflict, the conflict between Hinduism and Islam. It seems that in the beginning Naipaul has a prejudiced opinion about Islam. Later he becomes a little indulgent about it, without shedding his earlier viewpoint. In his opinion Islam is a complicated religion, being neither philosophical nor speculative. It is a revealed religion with a prophet and complete set of rules which produce fear and promise reward. Despite his interaction with the people of different Islamic countries. Naipaul’s view of Islam remains almost unchanged.
Naipaul does not cease to criticize Islam for time to come. He criticizes Islam not so much for its lack of metaphysics but for the threat it poses to modern civilization. According to Selwyn R. Cudjoe, “his ideological onslaught against Islam was the result of his deeply entrenchment fear that the Islamic way might subvert the ‘real’ civilizing order in which he had placed so much faith.”15 Naipaul is critical of Islam for its fundamentalist beliefs and for the formation of Islamic States.

Presumably Naipaul’s criticism of religion, or to be precise traditional religions, is energized by his deep rooted idea of the need for a composite culture, based on a composite religion. Naipaul’s religious ideal, in the fitness of things, is neither Hindu or Christian, nor Muslim. It is a blending of all enjoining a belief in living rituals in which every citizen, Hindu, or Muslim, or Christian, should participate. Naipaul’s composite religion has its faith in religious books of all traditions. He provides a blue-print of this religion in books like The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira. In the former he appreciates Ganesh for his taste in all religions:

And he could discuss religion sensibly as well. He was no bigot. He took as much interest in Christianity and Islam as in Hinduism. In the shrine, the old bedroom, he had pictures of Mary and Jesus next to Krishna and Vishnu; a crescent and star represented iconoclastic Islam. ‘All the same God,’ he said. Christians liked him, Muslims liked him, and Hindus, willing as ever to risk prayers to new gods, didn’t object.16

Likewise in The Suffrage of Elvira, he describes how people of every community own Bible and how Hindus and Muslims celebrate together the Hindu festival of lights and the Muslim festival of Hosein:
Things 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. 

Probably the most important feature of Naipaul’s religious vision is that it is rooted in his experiences of life, as Trinidadian Hindu, as an intellectual living in England, and above all as a traveller in countries remarkable for their religious beliefs. Champa Rao Mohan believes that “[m]uch of Naipaul’s writing issues from his personal experience of being a displaced member of a minority race and religion in Trinidad.” Eventually Naipaul belongs to the East Indians who were brought as indentured agricultural labourers to the West Indian colonies. Incidentally these Indians were able to preserve their Indian culture, their rites, as well as much of their customs and traditions. As Naipaul has duly painted out in

The Middle Passage:

Living by themselves in the villages, the Indians were able to have a complete community life. It was a world eaten up with jealousies and family feuds and village feuds; but it was a world of its own, a community within the colonial society, without responsibility, with authority doubly and trebly removed. Loyalties were narrow; to the family, the village. This has been responsible for the village-headman type of politician the Indian favours, and explains why Indian leadership has been so deplorable, so unfitted to handle the mechanics of party and policy. 

The East Indians had kept intact the social structure of their ancestors. Besides, they continued to observe their religious practices and kept alive cultural
traditions. They carried on the practice of chanting stanzas from The Ramayana, believing like their Indian forefathers that the chanting would take them to the abode of God. As early as 1888, J.H. Collens observed the diligence and devotion with which these East Indians observed their religion:

Even amongst the humble labourers who till our fields there is a considerable knowledge of them, and you may often in the evening, work being done, see and hear a group of coolies crouching down in a semicircle, chanting whole stanzas of the epic poems, Ramayana [sic] etc. In the preface of the Ramayana it is stated that “he who constantly hears and sings this poem will obtain the highest bliss hereafter, and become as one with the gods.” Hence the wily Babagee who reads to his ignorant countrymen, accounts from the Ramayana, or ‘Books of the Exploits of Ram,’ expects to get, and is tolerably sure of receiving, a large offertory of his pains.\(^{20}\)

Naipaul is indebted to his East Indian ancestry for the “corpus of myth, religion, and philosophy that predominates in Naipaul’s early fiction” (Cudjoe 10). He goes on to acknowledge this debt in An Area of Darkness:

The family life I have been describing began to dissolve when I was six or seven; when I was fourteen it had ceased to exist. Between my brother, twelve years younger than myself, and me there is more than a generation of difference. He can have no memory of that private world which survived with such apparent solidity up to only twenty-five years ago, a world which had lengthened out, its energy of inertia steadily weakening, from the featureless area of darkness which was India.

(An Area of Darkness 37-38)

Apart from the East Indian ancestry Naipaul is also obliged to his father for his “brahmin stand point,” for Hindu reverence for learning, and the Hindu religious training. He looks towards his father for the literary models as well as for the essentials of Hinduism. Naipaul acknowledges the formative role played by his father, in his “Foreword” to The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories:
I do not know how, in such a setting, in those circumstances of dependence and uncertainty, and with no example, the wish to be a writer came to my father: But I feel now, reading the stories after a long time and seeing so clearly (what was once hidden from me) the brahmin standpoint from which they are written, that it might have been the caste-sense, the Hindu reverence for learning and word, awakened by the beginnings of an English education and a Hindu religious training... He was concerned from the start with Hinduism and the practices of Hinduism... as late as 1951 he was writing to me ecstatically about Aurobindo’s commentaries on the Gita... they [the stories] are written from within a community and seem to be addressed to that community: a Hindu community essentially, which, because the writer, sees it as whole, he can at times make romantic, and at other times satirize.21

In spite of the encroachment of the Western cultural idea, Naipaul continues his faith in the Aryan culture of India. He remains to hold fast to his Brahminism. It is no wonder that he envisions himself, “being one of the early Aryan horsemen who conquered India and created its great Sanskritic culture.”22

Furthermore, in spite of his bitter criticism of the old Hinduism, Naipaul never ceases to be a true Brahmin. He curbs his rationalism to adhere to Brahminic devotion to intellectual pursuits. Likewise, Naipaul’s Trinidadian childhood is also important in the sense it brings him in contact with a mixed-race or rather with a new race of people which has worked out a synthesis of three cultures, to which the East Indians eventually provide the fourth dimension. Cudjoe discusses this merger in his inimitable style. “It must be remembered,” Cudjoe states, “that in the colonization of the Caribbean a new race of people – a mixture of European, American Indian, and African – came into being: a major synthesis of peoples that brought together the best of their three cultures. The coming of the East Indians to the Caribbean in 1838 as indentured labourers added
another dimension to the hegemonic dominance of the African cultural element, particularly in Guyana and Trinidad” (Cudjoe 13).

When Naipaul comes in contact with these people he learns about their religious practices, their customs, and manners. He goes on to describe his experience in books of his early period, The Mystic Masseur (1957), The Suffrage of Elvira (1958), The Miguel Street (1959), A House for Mr. Biswas (1961), as also in The Middle Passage (1962). It is mainly his encounter with the mixed race which is responsible for the idea of a composite religion.

Naipaul’s early life is also instrumental in producing a dualistic religious vision. It is interesting to find that Naipaul has a double vision of things. The reader gets confused when he finds two contradictory strains in him existing side by side. In case of his religious vision as well the reader is baffled, as he finds that Naipaul blows hot and cold in the same breath. This dualism can be traced from his very childhood, which made him aware of the two distinct worlds, the world of his house and the world outside it. Naipaul is well aware of this duality, as he writes:

So as a child I had this sense of two worlds, the world outside that tall corrugated-iron gate, and the world at home or, at any rate, the world of my grandmother’s house.23

The consciousness of the two worlds existing side by side in his mind continues to swell. Naipaul is unable to remove this rift. His life in London and his visit to India goes on to widen it more and more. Ultimately his broken image of India goes on to break his life itself. His journey to India, he confesses, “broken my life in two.”24
This split-consciousness becomes instrumental in shaping Naipaul’s vision literary as well as religious. Gordon Rohlehr finds him “caught up in two voids” (Cudjoe 6). Naipaul actually hankers after existentialism which he receives from Comus and the Eastern aestheticism. He eventually becomes the victim of double loyalties that compel him to reshuffle his stance frequently to find a common stand. “Because his loyalties,” writes Cudjoe, “stood midway between the Eastern and Western visions of the world, he gave the world a complex narrative of Eastern acceptance and Western striving: a complex retelling of the greatest epic of the East in language and cadence that the West could understand and accept” (Cudjoe 15).

In his literary forms as well, Naipaul has to shape new modes that can articulate his terrible vision of the Western individualism and the Indian religion, “The novels,” as Bruce King explains, “tend to have double structure in which events are both seen from a Western perspective – causality, individual will – and allude to a Hindu explanation in which the world of desire and things is an illusion consisting of cycles of creation and destruction. The European perspective dominates, but the Indian world view contests it and has its attractions” (King 15).

Naipaul’s Hindu world-view, as Bruce King’s remarks, is dominated by “a Brahmin’s devotion to study scholarship, philosophical thought, vocation.” King further adds that “there is a Brahminian consciousness of cleanliness, purity, food and the various duties expected of a well-regulated life” (King 15).

It is because of this double vision that Naipaul’s attitude towards the mother country of his forefathers is marked by the conflicting elements of fascination and
repulsion. In his life as well, he betrays contradictory elements. Though a thorough materialist and a professed atheist, he evinces a keen interest in spiritualism, as his characters and autobiographical passages go on to reveal. Bruce King, while tracing his conflicting attitude, goes on to state, “Naipaul satirizes Indian notions of fate, but his novels are usually structured around such Indian notions as the four stages of an ordered life – student, marriage and house owner, retreat into study as a preparation for total withdrawal from worldliness. There is a continuing conflict in his writings between the chaotic freedom of the world and the fulfilment of Brahmin ideals” (King 15).

Naipaul’s education and London life also play an important role in shaping his religious vision. His education in Chaguanas Government School and Tranquillity Boys School in Port of Spain, introduces him to a wider world and to different traditions of religion. Thereafter his life in Queen’s Royal College and Oxford further enlarges his area of experience. The new environment in which he is placed brings tremendous changes in his mentality and religious outlook. Away from the psychological confines of his family and the enclosed world of the Hindu community, he now comes in touch with a much larger post-colonial world teeming with a new spirit and moving with new energy. Coming closer to different literary and religious traditions Naipaul further expands his mental horizons. While confronting his new environment, he eventually cultivates a spirit of disinterestedness, a cardinal Hindu and Buddhist virtue. After many years, while summarising his London experience, Naipaul writes:
After eight years here I find I have, without effort, achieved the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment. I am never disturbed by national or international issues. I do not sign petitions, I do not vote. I do not march. And I never cease to feel that this lack of interest is all wrong.\textsuperscript{25}

Though Naipaul’s London experience becomes instrumental in cultivating the virtue of disinterestedness which comes from non-attachment and brings an expansion in his mental world, it also makes him aware of his alienation. This sense of alienation makes him incapable of aligning himself either to the Western community or to its eastern counterpart. Even though this position enables him to develop two different perspectives, it makes him a wanderer all the same, without an established identity. As we have discussed earlier, Naipaul’s doubleness or dichotomy does not allow him to develop a well defined religious vision. His double-nature leads him to a faithless state of scepticism, which seriously hampers his power of reaching firm conclusions. He remains as ever, a man stranded, a man ostensibly belonging to many worlds, but in reality to none of them. Landeg White, while giving a pen-picture of Naipaul’s so many identities remarks:

A Brahmin-cum-Englishman in Trinidad, a European in India, an Indian in London; one wonders whether such detachment, such seizing of the opportunities for retreat, is less a source of regret to him than a precondition of his writing life.\textsuperscript{26}

Since in his Indian visit, Naipaul behaves like a European, he is unable to identify himself with India, Indians, and the Indian ways of life. By allowing his Brahmin sensibility to be overshadowed by his Western vision, he loses his perceptive powers. Since he does not reinforce his consciousness with Hindu beliefs; he is unable to penetrate to the core of Hindu religious thought. He cannot
understand the unified vision of Hinduism. Furthermore, as he visits India, he
becomes painfully conscious of the chasm between the India of his imagination
and the real India. He realises that he lacks ability to understand the real India. To
quote Cudjoe:

In India Naipaul’s world of imagination gave way to the sensuous
reality of people and landscape, and the conflict between the two left
a painful impression. But more than just landscape separated
Naipaul from India. He had lost his ability to speak the language,
and as an unbeliever he was shut off from the Hindu religion. More
important, he did not feel linked to the people of India in any way
(Cudjoe 85).

Naipaul’s failure to come to grips with Hinduism in India makes him all the
more alienated. Furthermore, in India, “he felt a new sense of awareness and came
to realize the extent to which his identity had been circumscribed in Trinidad and
England” (Cudjoe 85). Nevertheless, there is a silver lining in the dark clouds of
his failed-visit. When he comes to verbalise his agonised experience of the Indian
trip in An Area of Darkness, he “draws upon the Bhagavad Gita and other Indian
religious texts to explain the Eastern world” (Cudjoe 82). This attempt proves his
increasing love of the ancient Indian religious texts as also his faith in the modern
version of the Hindu religion. Although his attitude remains ambivalent, it marks
something positive in his attitude towards India and Hinduism.

In his first visit, India appears to Naipaul a strange and elusive country, an
area of darkness; but in the second it appears as a wounded civilization
undermined by the alien invaders and the imperialists. However, in the second
visit, Naipaul is able to come to terms with its strangeness and to remove his
religious misgivings. But he is still confused, as his mind is suspended between acceptance and rejection. To quote him:

India, which I visited for the first time in 1962, turned out to be a very strange land. A hundred years had been enough to wash me clean of many Indian religious attitudes; and without these attitudes the distress of India was – and is – almost insupportable. It has taken me much time to come to terms with the strangeness of India, to define what separates me from the country; and to understand how far the ‘Indian’ attitudes of someone like myself, a member of a small and remote community in the New World, have diverged from the attitudes of people to whom India is still whole.  

Naipaul’s African experience is not at all enlightening from the religious point of view. It simply extends his prejudices against the black people. Nevertheless, the trip is rewarding in another sense, as it dramatizes the difficulties of an atheist like him. Through the character of Salim, the protagonist of A Bend in the River which embodies his African experience in the main, Naipaul mirrors his own difficulties and a sense of own security. His mentality can be understood from the words which he put in Salim’s mouth:

My own pessimism, my insecurity was a more terrestrial affair. I was without the religious sense of my family. The insecurity I felt was due to my lack of true religion.  

However, there is one aspect of religion, to be precise the African aspect that leaves its tremendous impression on the Caribbean religious prejudices. This aspect is related to the magical practices of Africans. Naipaul is extremely critical of magical practices followed by the Trinidadian Negroes.

Indeed Naipaul’s African experience draws a blank but his experience with the Muslim country is not only enlightening but also fruitful. It compels him to revise his negative image of the Muslims, built during his Trinidadian days. To
him Muslims were “somewhat more different than others.” Just from his boyhood
days he became highly suspicious of them. As he writes, “they were not to be
trusted; they would always do you down, and point was given to this by the
presence close to my grandmother’s house of a Muslim, in whose cap and gray
beard, avowals or his especial difference, lay every sort of threat” (Rai 16).

Though Naipaul revises his attitude towards Muslims, some of his earlier
notions continue to exist in his mind. To him Islam remains an imperfect religion
lacking in metaphysics and true civilization. It is not progressive in the sense that
it fails to reap the fruits of modern ideas in a proper spirit. It still sticks to its old
beliefs of fear and reward. Naipaul emphatically declares:

Islam, going by what I saw of it from the outside, was less
metaphysical and more direct than Hinduism. In this religion of fear
and reward, oddly compounded with war and worldly grief, there
was much that reminded me of Christianity – more visible and
“official” in Trinidad; and it was possible for me to feel that I knew
about it. The doctrine, or what I thought was its doctrine, didn’t
attract me. It didn’t seem worth inquiring into; and over the years, in
spite of travel, I had added little to the knowledge gathered in my
Trinidad childhood.29

Islam, in the opinion of Naipaul, is impervious to social and political
changes and still remains medieval. Obviously he fails to understand Islam much
in the same way as he had failed to understand Hinduism. Here again Naipaul sees
Islam with jaundiced eyes, regarding it as a threat “to the fragility of the dominant
Christian culture with which he aligned himself” (Cudjoe 200). He analyses and
interprets its dogma and religious practices with a purpose in his mind. Cudjoe
points out that Naipaul begins his Islamic journey with a fixed mind. He wants to
find out reasons why the followers of Islam undermine their relationship with the
Western world. For this purpose he visits several Islamic countries including Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia and goes on to embody his experiences in two of his masterpieces – Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey and Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples. In these books Naipaul examines every aspect of Islam including its involvement with politics. Though his visits improve his vision to some extent, his reservations remain intact. He sees no future for the followers of Islam, African religions, and Hinduism. As for Islam, he believes that its followers will involve themselves in violence and perish.

Analysing Naipaul’s attitude Cudjoe writes:

Without the West and its Christian guidance, no new forms of thought or practice can emerge. The fate of Islamic people is analogous to that of African and Indian people. In India all is nullity and decay, and in Africa salvation lies in the return to the bush. In the Islamic countries, the people will lose themselves in blood. Islam, it turns out, is not much different from the vices of Hinduism and African ancestral – bush worship. Unable to extricate themselves from their past, people are condemned to an even darker future. And even though the Muslims, unlike the Hindus and the Africans, may have felt some conflict between their faith and their material aspirations, which their oil money from the West allowed them to fulfill, their denial of the West and its Christian light can only bode ill for these unfortunate people (Cudjoe 204).

Obviously, Naipaul’s travels for finding a religious vision ends in fiasco. His travel experiences contribute very little to improve his vision. He remains torn between his Hindu birth as well as upbringing and his Western education as also an inflated love for Christianity. It is because of this overpowering love that he cannot touch the core of either Hinduism or Islam or even of Christianity. Nevertheless, Naipaul is successful in presenting before us a blue-print of the
composite religion and paves the way for a world religion acceptable to the entire humanity.

To sum up, V.S. Naipaul, one of the most dominant and dynamic figures of the English speaking world, is endowed with a religious vision which he unfolds in his fictional and non-fictional works. However, Naipaul understands religion in an inclusive way. He interprets it not only in a specific way which treats religion in terms of rituals, rites, symbols, myth, and even magic and many other such things but also relates it to the historical, social, and political questions. He is interested not so much in theoretical aspects of religion as in its practical side. Naipaul’s religious vision has four dimensions, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and the composite. While dealing with these dimensions, Naipaul maintains a secular and atheistic stance.

On the whole, Naipaul’s vision is marked by a religious pluralism which persuades him to go in for a composite religion, embodying central points of all religions. As for the origin, Naipaul’s vision can be traced back to his childhood as a Trinidadian Hindu. The early religious experience received from his family and the East Indian communally, is unfolded in such books as The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira, A House for Mr. Biswas and The Mimic Men.

These books also embody his early encounter with Christianity and Islam. Naipaul’s composite religious vision is reinforced by his education and his life in London where he imbibes the essence of Christianity as well as its ideals of free will and individuality. His visit to India brings him closer to Hinduism, but his vision remains blurred by his characteristic ambivalence. Naipaul’s Hindu vision
finds its expression in such books as *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*.

Likewise, Naipaul’s Islamic vision incorporated in *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* remains problematic. As for the African religion of magic, he fails to develop a precise idea of it. In brief Naipaul’s religious vision is wonderful, in the sense it gives a blue-print of a composite religion paving the way for a world religion acceptable to entire humanity.
Chapter 1 – Endnotes


