CHAPTER 4

NAIPaul’S VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY

Ostensibly, Naipaul’s favourite religion is Christianity. While he condemns Hinduism and Islam in unequivocal terms, he reserves tremendous admiration for Christianity. The reasons of his appreciations are not far to seek. He believes that Christianity is responsible for the achievements of the Western culture. He thinks that it provides a proper religious background for its development. In his opinion Christian values of love and freedom are powerful enough, not only to energize it but also to sustain it. He goes on to believe that the dynamic nature of Christianity enables it to adjust adequately to the changing world, to its scientific progress as well as to its institutions of democracy and capitalism. For him, it is only Christianity that can set the world on the path of betterment and happiness.

Although, Naipaul aligns himself to the values and the pre-occupations of Christianity and finds himself an integral part of it, he is unable to forget his Hindu origins and his Brahminic sensibility. This inability produces in him an inner conflict which continues throughout his life and which surfaces in most of his books. Even though he accepts the Christian concept of the world, he does not forget the Hindu world view either. For the most of his life, he remains suspended between the Eastern World of acceptance and the Western World of striving. Let us remember that Naipaul for all practical purposes equates the Eastern World with India and the Western World with England. The conflict between these worlds becomes one of the chief themes of his creative writing. His books are informed
according to Selwyn R. Cudjoe by the, “conflicting pull of the Eastern (Hindu) and Western (Christian) worlds, a subset of which was the rising conflict between the feudal world of the Hindus and the colonial capitalist world.”¹

Interestingly, Naipaul visualizes this conflict against Islam as well. However, this conflict is not interpreted in ideological terms but in terms of threat which the Islamic culture poses to the Christian world by its fundamentalism and mimicry. Since Naipaul does not give an exclusive expression to his Christian vision in any of his early books, we have to rely on his implicit and eximPLICIT comparisons, which he frequently makes and suggests in at the initial stages of his literary career. For understanding, his early Christian vision we have to study such works as The Mystic Masseur (1957), The Suffrage of Elvira (1958), and A Flag on the Island (1967) especially to its two stories, “My Aunt Gold Teeth” and “A Christmas Story.” But for his full-fledged Christian vision we have to take into account A Turn in the South (1989) written after his first hand experiences of Hinduism and Islam.

In the The Mystic Masseur Naipaul makes no direct reference either to the Christian vision or to the Christian values. There are only suggestions which enable us to surmise his views. To begin with Naipaul makes references to modernity, which he equates with the Western culture. What he does in the novel is simply to show a process of transition in Trinidadian communities from tradition to modernity. According to Champa Rao Mohan, “Trinidad is portrayed as a society in upheaval, where the old order is giving way to new forces of
modernity.” He associates tradition with the feudal order of Hinduism, while modernity with the capitalistic culture of Christianity.

Naipaul portrays this transition from tradition to modernity, or to be precise, from feudalism to capitalism with the help of the success story of Ganesh, the protagonist of The Mystic Masseur. Ganesh rises, “to prominence from masseur to mystic to the position of an MBE (Member of the British Empire), one of the highest honors a colonial subject could hope to achieve” (Cudjoe 38). The secret of his success lies in his acceptance of the Western culture. “Not only,” as Lillian Feder comments, “he has changed his profession and his convictions, he has changed his name to suit his new self-image. Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair has become G. Ramsay Muir.”

While Ganesh lives in the village, he is devoted to Hinduism. In his hut he keeps the religious books as well as a beautiful statue of Vishnu:

Nothing had prepared me for what I was to see inside Ganesh’s hut. As soon as we entered my mother winked at me, and I could see that even the taxi-driver was fighting to control his astonishment. There were books, books, here, there, and everywhere; books piled crazily on the table, books rising in mounds in the corners, books covering the floor. I had never before seen so many books in one place...

I tried to forget Ganesh thumping my leg about and concentrated on the walls. They were covered with religious quotations, in Hindi and English, and with Hindu religious pictures. My gaze settled on a beautiful four-armed god standing in an open lotus.

The icon of Vishnu is the symbol of, “the way of life of the East Indian within the feudal-communal world of Trinidad and Tobago” (Cudjoe 38).
But when, “he departs from the countryside, emblematic of the feudal-communal world” (Cudjoe 39), after his Western education, Ganesh gradually abandons the path of Hinduism and goes on to accept the path of Christianity. Though he still adheres to his love for the doctrines of the Gita and the Hindu scriptures. He becomes inclined to the books about the Western culture:

It gave a new direction to his reading. Forgetting the war, he became a great Ideologist and bought all the books on Hindu philosophy he could get in San Fernando. He read them, marked them, and on Sunday afternoons made notes. At the same time he developed a taste for practical psychology and read many books on The Art of Getting On. But India was his great love. It became his habit, on examining a new book, to look first at the index to see whether there were any references to India or Hinduism. If the references were complimentary he bought the book. Soon he owned a curious selection.

(The Mystic Masseur 102)

With the simultaneous perusal of the books of two cultures, he becomes aware of two modes of perception – the Eastern and the Western. Subsequently, “[i]n his persona,” Cudjoe states, “the tenets of Hinduism and Christianity, the theology of feudalism and capitalism, respectively, merge” (Cudjoe 41). This merger inspires Ganesh to reconcile the values of Hinduism and Christianity on the basis of Gandhism, which ensues a combination of religious and social, and political activities. Obviously, Gandhism makes an attempt, “to synthesize the traditional world of Hinduism and mysticism (feudalism) and the contemporary world of Christianity and pragmatism (capitalism)” (Cudjoe 45).

This process of transition from the traditional values to modern values is also visible in other characters as well. It can be marked in Ganesh’s wife Leela who goes on to adopt the western speech and mannerism:
Everyday Leela became more refined. She often went to San Fernando to visit Soomintra, and to shop. She came back with expensive saris and much heavy jewellery. But the most important change was in her English. She used a private accent which softened all harsh vowel sounds; her grammar owed nothing to anybody, and included a highly personal conjugation of the verb to be.

(The Mystic Masseur 143)

This process of change can also be marked in other communities. Naipaul describes the eagerness of Trinidadian people to adopt the Western ways. It is apparent from the dinner scene embodied in the novel. Commenting on this scene, Gordon Rohleher makes a significant observation:

One can accept this as farce intended, in its distorted way, to show the Creole and India on the painful and ridiculous road to whiteness. But the suspicion persists that Naipaul himself regards these people; with more contempt than compassion.5

One can easily mark how the Western values which are synonymous with Christian values drive Hindu values out of circulation.

Naipaul condemns Hinduism for its inadquacy and its lack of dynamism to confront modern problems. As against this, he admires Christianity for its dynamism and ability to energize modernity. In the The Suffrage of Elvira, Naipaul attacks Hinduism from various angles. He shows that Hindus and Muslims are unable to adapt themselves to the conditions of the modern world. Naipaul scores this point through Chittaranjan who is one of the chief characters of the novel. “His Brahminism” writes Bruce King, “is out-moded, unable to adapt to the free-for-all spoils that the bringing together of various cultures has produced in Trinidad.”6 Furthermore, as Naipaul believes the East Indian community lacks power and willingness to attune itself to modern social and political institutions.
For instance, when the East Indians get an opportunity to elect their representatives through a democratic process, they cannot take the best out of it. In the process of election they indulge in the corrupt practices like using money-power and the communal card. Most of the prominent characters like Harbans, Chittaranjan, Baksh, and even Lookhoor engage themselves in undemocratic practices.

For exposing the limitations of the Eastern community and their religions, Naipaul uses a much wider canvas. He does not address only to Hindus and Muslims but to other communities as well including the Negro and the Spanish. Under this extended background, Naipaul demonstrates that the Eastern community would have to shed their narrow-mindedness and to abandon its age old evil practices and superstitions. Through this novel, Naipaul “suggests that East Indians could solve their problems in the Wilderness only by rejecting such feudal practices as the taking of child brides, the proscription against educating girls, and the belief in fate and the preordination of events” (Cudjoe 46). He also demonstrates that such process of change has already begun. This change can be marked in such young characters of the young generation as Nelly Chittaranjan and pundit Dhaniram’s daughter-in-law who have liberated themselves from the feudal atmosphere of Elvira. Pundit Dhaniram himself is influenced by the winds of change. Though a Hindu priest, he had his education at one of the Presbyterian schools of the Canadian Mission, “where he had been taught hymns and other Christian things.” Cudjoe finds him evincing a keen delight in his dual heritage because, as he says, “[i]t make me see both sides... and even now, although he was
a Hindu priest, he often found himself humming hymns like ‘Jesus loves me, yes, I
know.’

Dhaniram’s dualism is a direct off-shoot of the conflict between two orders,
the feudal and capitalism. This conflict can be marked symbolically in the picture
on the wall of Dhaniram’s house:

In the light of the Petromax he [Mahadeo] studied Dhaniram’s
veranda walls. There were many Hindu coloured prints; but by far
the biggest thing was a large Esso calendar, with Pundit Dhaniram’s
religious commitments written in pencil above the dates. It looked
as though Dhaniram’s practice was falling off. It didn’t matter.
Foam knew that Dhaniram also owned the fifth part of a tractor and
Baksh said that was worth at least two hundred dollars a month.

(The Suffrage of Elvira 48)

Obviously, the Hindu “coloured prints” symbolize Dhaniram’s Hindu
sensibility, while the calendar symbolizes the nascent capitalist order. The
changing face of the Hindu and Muslim communities also has some positive
points. It is pleasant to find Lookhoor pleading for unity of the races and the
religions that is so important for the liberation from the old tradition and for
establishing the identity of the inhabitants of Elvira:

People of Elvira, the fair constituency of Elvira... Unite! You have
nothing to lose but your chains. Unite and cohere. Vote for the man
who has lived among you, toiled among you, prayed among you,
worked among you. This is the voice of the renowned and ever
popular Lookhoor begging you and urging you and imploring you
and entreatng you and beseeching you to vote for Preacher, the
renowned and ever popular Preacher. Use your democratic rights on
election day and vote one, vote all. This, good people of Elvira, is
the voice of Lookhoor.

(The Suffrage of Elvira 74)
In other positive point is the marriage of religion with politics surfacing in the form of the mixture of the Utopian and the Marxist slogan such as, "Socialinduism Socialism-cum-Hinduism" (The Mystic Masseur 200). Naipaul’s central message embodied in this novel is the old one. The East Indians, he believes, have to break the dyke of superstition and evil practices in order to exist in this world. Evidently, Naipaul has nothing to say in favour of Hinduism as well as Islam and their adherents; but he has much to say in favour of Christianity and its adherents Negroes. First of all, he paints Preacher, the Negro candidate, in shining colours. He seems to be an embodiment of the Christian virtues, love, and tolerance. As N. Ramadevi writes, “though defeated at the elections, emerges as an affable and congenial individual capable of transcending the bitterness and rancour at the political hustings.” Among other characters Mr. Cuffy, “embodies in himself the possibility of human virtue, surviving the assaults of political duplicity and corruption.”

Likewise Francis, stands out as one capable of intelligent detachment, which reminds us of the novelist’s own point of view. All the Negro characters provide some amount of hope for a better future in this otherwise frenzied and depraved society. Evidently Naipaul portrays all the Negro characters possessing social values, manners, and virtues of innocence, humanity affection, and an incorruptible nature. “The Negro community,” writes Ramadevi, “thus symbolizes the power of sanity, magnanimity, and grace in a world of confusion, frenzy, and rootlessness” (Ramadevi 46).
In the story, “My Aunt Gold Teeth” included in *A Flag on the Island*, Naipaul adopts another strategy to attack the values and practices of Hinduism and to underscore the superiority of Christian practices. The story is about a staunch Hindu woman, Gold Teeth who had an unflinching faith in her religion. She was childless, fat, and gullible. She knew very little about Hinduism. Her knowledge was limited only, “from the ceremonies and the taboos, and this was enough for her. Gold Teeth saw God as a Power, and religious ritual as a means of harnessing that Power for great practical good, her good.” Surprisingly, she began to indulge in superstitious Christian practices. It was because she came in touch with the Canadian Mission. But in spite of this influence she could not be persuaded even to think of conversion. Above all both of her father and her husband were famous Hindu Pundits. Besides, “[s]he was willing to select, modify and incorporate alien eccentricities into her worship; but to abjure her own faith – never!” (*A Flag on the Island* 14).

Gold Teeth was drawn towards the Presbyterian Christianity presumably because she was childless. She wanted, “to trap the channel the supernatural power’, of both Hinduism and Christianity to give birth to a child” (Cudjoe 27). She was forced to make compromise later because of the illness of her husband. However, Gold Teeth became painfully conscious of her mistaken choice. She came to believe that the illness of her husband might be cured by her Christian prayer. Tormented by the feeling she asked pundit Ganesh whether her decision was erroneous:
“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.”

(A Flag on the Island 17)

Even after this reassurance Gold Teeth could not forgive her flirtation with Christ and her, what Sudha Rai phrases, “crossing the religious Lakshman Rekha of Hinduism.” Naturally, when her husband was dead, she was overwhelmed by a fit of self-abnegation. She was disappointed by “every reminder of Christianity in the house” (A Flag on the Island 21). The story suggests that Naipaul is not prepared to accept superstition in any form Hindu or Christian.

Interestingly, Naipaul does not approve either superstition or the superfluous practices of Christianity. He does not like that the East Indian should imitate these things. He embodied this approval in another story of A Flag on the Island, “A Christmas Story” in which he attacks mimicry in unequivocal terms. The story also, “contrasts the progressive tendencies of Christianity (‘the grace and dignity’ of its ceremonies, ‘the peace and culture’ of its marriage ceremony) with the backwardness of Hinduism, which, as the narrator contends, is a ‘religion that deadens its devotees’ and is ‘little fitted for the modern world’” (Cudjoe 96).

In a confessional mode, Naipaul tells us the pain and humiliation suffered by Choonilal who has after his conversion to Presbyterianism becomes Randolph. After conversion Randolph undergoes a process of self-analysis, as he argues:

It seems that everything has come late to me. I continued a Hindu, though of that religion I saw and knew little save meaningless and shameful rites, until I was nearly eighteen. Why I so continued I cannot explain. Perhaps it was the inertia with which
that religion deadens its devotees. It did not, after all, require much intelligence to see that Hinduism, with its animistic rites, its idolatry, its emphasis on mango leaf, banana leaf and – the truth is the truth – cowdung, was a religion little fitted for the modern world. I had only to contrast the position of the Hindus with that of the Christians. I had only to consider the differing standards of dress, houses, food. Such differences have today more or less disappeared, and the younger generation will scarcely understand what I mean. I might even be reproached with laying too great a stress on the superficial. What can I say? Will I be believed if I say that to me the superficial has always symbolized the profound? But it is enough, I feel, to state that at eighteen my eyes were opened. I did not have to be ‘converted’ by the Presbyterians of the Canadian Mission. I had only to look at the work they were doing among the backward Hindus and Moslems of my district. I had only to look at their schools, to look at the houses of the converted.

(A Flag on the Island 33-34)

In his conversion to superior religion, Randolph visualizes a necessary means of progress and survival in a capitalist society. With this story, Naipaul re-emphasizes his old belief that Hinduism does not have an appropriate ideology to combat the problems of the modern world. Hindus have no option but to free themselves from its bonds and to come to Christian fold for their betterment.

However, the act of conversion has its own difficulties. As Suman Gupta states, “becoming a Christian in that environment is a defining act which involves a displacement, a wistfulness for things European, and a distaste for his own heritage.”11 The narrator of this story Randolph himself gives expression to the agonies of self definition of being a Christian:

As much as by the name Randolph, pleasure was given me by the stately and clean – there is no other word for it – rituals sanctioned by my new religion. How agreeable, for instance, to rise early on a Sunday morning, to bathe and breakfast and then, in the most spotless of garments, to walk along the still quiet and cool roads to our place of worship, and there to see the most respectable and respected, all dressed with a similar purity, addressing themselves to
the devotions in which I myself could participate, after for long
being an outsider, someone to whom the words Christ and Father
meant no more than winter or autumn or daffodil. Such of the
unconverted village folk who were energetic enough to be awake and
alert at that hour gaped at us as we walked in white procession to our
church. And though their admiration was sweet, I must confess that
at the same time it filled me with shame to reflect that not long
before I too formed part of the gaping crowd. To walk past their
gaze was peculiarly painful to me, for I, more perhaps than anyone in
that slow and stately procession, knew -- and by my silence had for
nearly eighteen years condoned -- the practices those people indulged
in in the name of religion.

(A Flag on the Island 35)

Randolph’s feeling of pain and shame is common to persons who relinquish the
religion of their forefathers to embrace another. The difficulties of conversion are a
recurring theme in Naipaul, a theme which surfaces in a big way in his Islamic
novels.

Up to this point, Naipaul’s religious vision whether Hindu, Islamic or
Christian suffers from two defects. First of all, it is a prejudiced vision of a person
who has made up his mind to favour one particular religion and to disdain and
denigrate every other. Naipaul’s prejudices do not allow him to see the virtues of
other religious traditions, the virtues that energize and sustain then. The second
defect is his narrow minded conception of religion that allows him only to see
surfaces, only the religion in practice in the form of rites and rituals. This narrow
approach does not allow Naipaul to penetrate the deeper strata of religion.
Subsequently, he remains bereft of the ennobling virtues of faith and the ecstasies
of religious experience.

Behind Naipaul’s prejudice and narrow mindedness lies his so called
atheism and scepticism which are difficult to define. They arise from his
ambivalence, exemplified by his double statements. He continues to talk of
religion as a moral force required for energizing and sustaining the elements of
progress and development.

Obviously, Naipaul relates religion to sociology. In the same vein he
visualizes Christianity in sociological terms of striving peace, culture, forwardness
etc. He admires it for the grace and dignity of its ceremonies, especially marriage.
Indeed Naipaul talks of grace but it is not the grace of God, granting happiness and
salvation to Christians. These virtues of religion can be called only sociological.
Indeed Naipaul is neither a theoretician nor a theologian, attentive to the deeper
questions of religion dealing with Man, Nature, and God. His atheism does not
allow him to explore such realities.

With this impaired vision Naipaul goes to India to re-examine Hinduism.
Again his jaundiced eyesight stops him to find the reality behind its wounded
civilization. Naipaul’s eyesight continues to holdfast to its surfaces. He is not able
to see the sustaining power of Hinduism and its capacity for revival or
rejuvenation, its immense power of mystic consciousness and the lasting value of
its scriptures. The same impaired vision is also visible in his journey of Islamic
countries like Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. He can see Islam only as a
threat to Christianity and its product Western civilization. He hastens to condemn
Islam for its fundamentalism, its parasitism, and mimicry. He is amused to find
Muslims of the four countries enjoying the fruits of the western scientific and
 technological advancement and abusing and condemning it at one and the same
time. Naipaul is bewildered at this altitude of blowing hot and cold in the same
breath. However, beyond this bewilderment he is unable to go. He has no eye for visualizing the Islamic world view, its theology, metaphysics, and its staunch faith, in the holy Kuran and the Prophet, a faith which inspires them to overpower any ideal and to make any sacrifice. Over and above all he condemns the adherents of Hinduism, Islam, and African religions, for their sticking to their past which is nothing better than a dead wood.

Wandering for a number of years in religious bewilderment, Naipaul begins to find his way in *A Turn in the South*. In his trip to the Southern States, he realizes that religion is not only a social phenomenon but something much more, something multi-dimensional, and something that caters physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of man. In his journey to the South, probably the most congenial of his travels abroad, Naipaul comes face to face with the multi-pronged and pervasive influence of religion in human life. In the South Naipaul comes to develop precise notions of religion, religious life, and the religious phenomena like meeting, prayers, service, conversion etc. Interestingly now he speaks of Christ, Christianity, Christian community, even Christian fundamentalism, and Christian sects in good humour. With his usual pretensions of atheism, he describes the pervasive character of religion in the South. In a surprise move, Naipaul sheds his prejudices against religious fundamentalist and takes a lenient view. We can support this observation with the statement of Rob Nixon:

The Naipaul of *A Turn in the South* finds himself once more an atheist among the believers. Indeed, some of his finest insights reveal the versatility of religion in the South and the improbable
alliances it sustains. But his stance toward both religious fundamentalism and racial tension becomes indulgent to a degree quite unlike his attitude to related phenomena in, say, Trinidad, Pakistan, and Malaysia. This discrepancy becomes especially stark in his writing about white southern evangelists and racists, of both the genteel and redneck varieties.  

To analyze Naipaul’s new religious vision let us begin with his new definition of religion as an identity. In the chapter entitled, “Atlanta: Tuning In”, which embodies the experience of his visit to Atlanta, Naipaul refers to a lively statement of a youngman of Georgia who equates religion with identity: “Identity as religion, religion as identity.” The youngman goes on to interpret religion especially Christianity in terms of emotion equating it with family:

The church is very much the same thing. Family members. The Holiness Church is a very emotional religion, and what struck me early on was how very different people were in church from what I knew of them at home. The emotion they expressed in church was different. There would be a lot of shouting. The preacher would try to work them up to the sinfulness of human nature. There would be moments during the service when people would get up and speak in tongues, and people would try to interpret what was being said. And there were times when people would get saved.

(A Turn in the South 49)

For him religion is not a reaching out to the world but a calling away from the world. To quote Naipaul:

“This religion was not a reaching out to the world.”
“This religion was a calling away from the world.”

(A Turn in the South 49)

Naipaul goes on corroborate this statement by his new idea of religion as a store house of emotion. He also mentions religion as a vocation, which different
people understand in different meanings. For some, it means service to the community and for others it means to confront the world:

Religion was like something in the air, a store of emotion on which people could draw according to their need. The religious vocation could come to many. For some the vocation contained the ideas of service and community. For others, with stronger sense of self, who had gone out into the world with a will to win but had then withdrawn for various reasons, the vocation came as a wish to expound the word, to preach, to make an offering to God and men of the life that had been lived.

(A Turn in the South 69)

According to Naipaul, religion is not only a source of livelihood to them, a vocation but also an inspiration. For all intents and purposes, a religion like Christianity reconciles the two spirits of this-worldliness and the other-worldliness. Naipaul makes it crystal clear with the statement of William, in the chapter entitled, “The Frontier, The Heartland”:

“Someone wrote to my father several months ago. In this letter he was saying: I enjoy my work; how does a successful businessman continue being a Christian? Should he stay with his business, or should he go back into the church? My father wrote a letter to explain why it’s necessary for a Christian businessman to be in the world. Our own preacher here has said several times that with the TV pastors getting into such hot water and getting such bad attention, he’s been seeing some doors closed against him; and the responsibility for leading people to Christianity is more on the shoulders of laymen.”

(A Turn in the South 186)

Adhering to his views, Naipaul also speaks of religious devotion and the business talent in other religions, including Hinduism. But he is also conscious of the difference between the Hindu and the Christian businessmen. The Hindu
businessman does not inculcate the idea of service, since he feels that he is responsible not to people but only to God:

So the religious ideas of the God-given talent, work, and accountability coincided with sound business practice. It was true of other religious groups as well, this coincidence of religious devotion and business sense: one kind of dedication encouraging, and even becoming, another kind of dedication. It was true of certain Hindu caste groups and certain minority or heretical sects in Islam. But religions and cultures have their own identities. One isn’t just like another. The idea of the God-given talent is contained in the Hindu idea of dharma; but the Hindu religious-business dedication is different from the dedication William was talking about. However, much his business practices appear to contain the idea of service, the Hindu businessman has a contract with God alone, and not with men.

(A Turn in the South 187)

With his new sense of religion, Naipaul becomes conscious of the meaning of religiosity and religious fervour as well. He realizes the importance of religious sentiment, while attending Easter Sunday services with Hetty in a Church described in, “Down Home: A Landscape of Small Ruins.” He speaks of a near-eccstatic experience produced by a combination of so many things. We can do no better than to quote Naipaul, for having an idea of his supreme pleasure felt at the meeting:

The leader of the choir, a big woman, adjusted the microphone. And after this small, delicate gesture, there was passion. The hymn was “What About Me?” There was hand-clapping from the choir, and swaying. One man stood up in the congregation – he was in a brown suit – and he clapped and sang. A woman in white, with a white hat, got up and sang. So I began to feel the pleasures of the religious meeting: the pleasures of brotherhood, union, formality, ritual, clothes, music, all combining to create a possibility of ecstasy.

(A Turn in the South 15)
Coming to Christianity, Naipaul gives a comprehensive description of the religion, “that taught love and peace” (A Turn in the South 54). He observes that Christianity is also helpful in other pursuits of life including worldly success and happiness. This important point is made by Danny in the chapter entitled, “Atlanta: Tuning In.” He tells Naipaul how he was brought in Christian fold by a black minister who was also a musician:

He came to my house a week after he had sent the Bible. My wife wasn’t there at that particular time. He came with his saxophone. We played a little. And he really became interested in my singing. And he shared Christ with me. We had prayers. And I knew – but it was primarily reading the Bible for myself and seeing that where I had been carrying the burden of living, being successful, being happy, carrying that burden on my own shoulders – I knew. I saw through the Scriptures, that God, through Christ, offered everything I had been in pursuit of.

(A Turn in the South 73)

After this meeting Danny becomes a Christian and begins to believe in a personal God who inspires man to follow a righteous path. God as The Holy Spirit instils in man such Christian virtues, as “love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, meekness, and self-control” (A Turn in the South 74). In order to succeed in life and to get happiness, he has to depend not on the worldly circumstances but also on his relationship with God. According to Danny successes does not mean achievement but the peace and joy that comes after the feeling of God’s love and his spirit of forgiveness. To quote him:

So I prayed and invited Christ to come into my life. I believe that God became human to take on our sins so that we could live in the righteousness of God. There was a scripture pertaining to that that really grabbed me. It was Galatians 5:22. The Living Bible put this way: The Holy Spirit wants to produce fruit in you. ‘Fruit.’ Singular, but plural. Fruit, which are: love, joy, peace, patience,
goodness, meekness, and self-control. That really grabbed me. To be successful is to have all of that living within me, because it wouldn’t be my circumstances that would determine my happiness, but my relationship with God. So to be successful no longer depended upon personal achievements, but just simply having the peace and joy of knowing that God loves you. So much so that he would forgive me for all the things I have done.

(A Turn in the South 73-74)

Furthermore, Naipaul goes on to demonstrate Christianity as a religion of pain. In his trip to Southern states described in the chapter “The Religion of the Past,” Naipaul realizes how the wounds suffered in the past take a religious colouring. While going to Columbia and looking at the Confederate Memorial built by the woman of the South Carolina in 1879, he becomes painfully conscious of the wound inflicted by the past. The pain suffered by the people of the South, reminds him of crucifixion of Christ and the martyrdom of Ali and his sons. The Southern grief like the grief of Christians and Shias assume religious dimension.

As Naipaul explains:

The pain of defect is something that can be shared by everyone, since everyone at some stage in his life knows defeat of some sort and hopes in his heart to undo it, or at least to have his cause correctly seen. But the pain of the Confederate Memorial is very great; the defeat it speaks of is complete. Defeat like this leads to religion. It can be religion: the crucifixion, as eternal a grief for Christians as, for the Shias of Islam, the death of Ali and his sons. Grief and the conviction of a just cause; defeat going against every idea of morality, every idea of the good story, the right story, the way it should have been: the tears of the Confederate Memorial are close to religion, the helpless grief and rage (such as the Shias know) about an injustice that cannot be rehearsed too often.

(A Turn in the South 100)
Naipaul is so much influenced by the grief of defeat felt by the Confederate people that he forgets his condemnation of Shias while visiting Iran. Taking a note of Naipaul’s U-turning, Fawzia Mustafa writes, “His enthusiasm is such that even his comparisons with Shias and Islamic fundamentalists fail to remind him of the disdain similar protestations of faith evinced from him during his Islamic journey, *Among the Believers*.” However, according to Naipaul, the grief felt by the vanquished people that grief was especial like a religion rendering an experience of sacred pain.

In Tallahassee Naipaul comes to describe black Christianity. In his encounter with the reverend Bernyce Clausell, he comes to know about the strong religious instinct of the black people, Christianity as a way of life, and Christianity as a religion which inspires people to oppose injustice and discrimination. As for the religious instinct of the black people, Clausell tells Naipaul that it comes from slavery and even from Africa, the ancestral home of slaves. Christianity as a way of life has its roots in history. To quote an excerpt from the dialogue between Clausell and Naipaul:

“I think it comes from slavery. And even from before slavery. From Africa. They just had a strong religious heritage. In slavery God was their deliverer. And they felt that some day God would work it out.”

Was it sometimes a form of escapism?

“With some people it might be a form of escapism. I wouldn’t deny it. But primarily Christianity is a way of life. I should say that the white churches that I know are similar to ours. They are doing great mission work. And more than we are, because they have the finances. Religion has had a great part in helping to break down segregation.”

(A Turn in the South 124)
Christianity is not in any way a religion of scepticism and timidity. It is a religion, which is inspired by a spirit of opposition to injustice. Clausell tells Naipaul how she, inspired by Quakerism, waged a relentless war to end segregation. She began her crusade as peaceful agitation to unite all the lunch counters in the city. While fighting against discrimination the participants were told not to react at all, in spite of grave provocation. Clausell tells us this story of Christian agitation in eloquent terms:

“When we went to the large cafeteria in the War Department building, where we worked, whites would not want to sit at the same table with us. If we sat down with them they would move. We just began to know that this exists. It made me a fighter, all right. We joined a group there that was spearheaded by the Quakers, and our aim was to integrate some of the lunch counters in the city. We would meet – all the Quakers were white – and have prayers and decide where we were going. And we were being told not to show any reaction to any violence that would be shown to us. We had to be trained. You can’t imagine the things that were said to us. People would spit in our faces. If we drank out of a glass they would take it up and throw it away. Christ said turn the other cheek. And finally Washington was integrated, a little later.”

(A Turn in the South 125)

Naipaul is tremendously influenced by the religious instinct of the southern people. He is amazed by their unprecended and incomparable religiosity. During his earlier journeys of India and Islamic countries, he did not come across with such religious fervour. Naipaul acknowledges this fact without mincing his worlds:

That had been the great discovery of my travels so far in the South. In no other part of the world had I found people so driven by the idea of good behaviour and the good religious life. And that was true for black and white.

(A Turn in the South 164)
Interestingly, Naipaul does not fail to mention the visionary aspect of Christianity. He tells us the story of William who has a visionary experience after his Baptization, in the chapter entitled, “The Frontier, The Heartland.” In the vision, William sees Jesus Christ walking through the door and entering into his heart. Let us quote William’s description of his experience in his own words:

“I had a dream around that time – but it didn’t cross my mind until many years later. I was spending the night with my grandmother. I was sleeping on the porch. I remember sitting up in bed waking up real fast – and I thought I saw Jesus Christ walking through the back door. The door had a little knocker, a wooden ball on a string, and I remember hearing that knocker, and the door opening. And I just had that vision of Jesus Christ walking through that door. And I remember sitting up all night to see if he was going out through the back door. But he never did. I never thought much about the dream until six or seven years ago. I was riding down the highway, and it just flashed back in my mind. At that point I really realized that it was Jesus Christ entering my heart. And the reason I didn’t see him leave that back door was that he didn’t leave us. I just haven’t discussed that story with my family. But I remember that dream and that whole night as if it was yesterday. I feel that Jesus Christ entered my heart that day and he’s never left.”

(A Turn in the South 184-185)

However, as Naipaul emphasizes, a Christian does not live in a visionary world but in the real world. “We believe,” says Jim to Ben in the chapter entitled, “Sanctities,” “that Christians live in the real world and should not withdraw from the real world” (A Turn in the South 240).

Obviously Naipaul evinces keen interest also in the frontier Christianity, dominated by fundamentalist sects. He describes in some detail the Church of Christ with its twin beliefs in the Bible and in a return to the earliest Christian faith. “The Church of Christ,” as Naipaul believes, “represented an abandoning of
Protestantism, and did not represent a return to Rome, but to the very beginning of the faith, all the way back to Pentecost, the first Biblical dating of the Christian culture” (A Turn in the South 236).

The Church of Christ possesses the frontier spirit and is close to the Baptist Church in many things especially in things like “Bible, Trinity, a Church, evangelism, personal conversion to Christ.” But the Church of Christ surpasses Baptism in many other respects, including its attitude towards music, Lord’s Supper, and Baptism:

We are close to the Baptists in many things. Bible, Trinity, a church, evangelism, personal conversions to Christ. But we are different in other things. We sing without music. We observe the Lord’s Supper weekly. We teach that baptism is essential to salvation. The Baptists teach baptism only as a requirement for admission to the church. And we’re autonomous; every church is independent.

(A Turn in the South 237)

Melvin tells Naipaul in “Sanctities”, that the Church of Christ blends traditional values with universal principles of Christianity. However, this blending at times produces confusion, Melvin does not like the Church instilling the feeling of guilt in people. As he tells Naipaul:

“The Church of Christ does an excellent job in meshing traditional values with Christian principles, universal Christian principles. The result is that when one begins to doubt the traditions he is unable to separate his doubt about tradition from his belief in Christian principles. It becomes very confusing. The confusion is at times unbearable. I can understand why Henry has trouble finding words for certain things. There’s guilt and alienation, the idea of abandoning your heritage. I went through a lot of guilt. Guilt is the most critical. The Church of Christ deliberately instills guilt in people. It is extremely judgmental. There is almost the circle-of-wagons sense that if you attack certain traditions it’s blasphemy. I think I should tell you that I think of myself as a spiritual person.
Actually, I think I am more spiritual now than I was. In a literal sense.”

(A Turn in the South 243)

In spite of its frontier spirit, the Baptist and Church of Christ are loosing ground. Both of them are inspired by the frontier spirit. Naturally, as the frontier spirit dies, these Churches also suffer extinction. The followers of these Churches shift their allegiance to the Presbyterian Church. As reverend Ptomey had hinted, the Presbyterian religion was more socially acceptable. The other reason was that it was more lenient, less demanding, less intrusive or encompassing. Religion now had to have its compartment, almost its social place” (A Turn in the South 244). In this way, Naipaul returns to his old position underlining the social aspect of Religion.

In the end, Naipaul also mentions a new form of Christianity envisaging the merger of civil and cultural religions. He points out that people are now beginning to disbelieve the tenet of the Church of Christ. Now they emphasize that religion should not be incredible. People now realize that there is no finality in religion, and hence, there should always be a scope for revision and development. As Will Campbell believes “Christ offered no creed or special theology.” According to him, “faith was something that had to be constantly looked for and struggled towards” (A Turn in the South 249).

In his encounter with the southern poet James Applewhite the exponent of tobacco culture and an avid supporter of Jesse Helms, Naipaul reworks Christian fundamentalism into universal humanism. In North Carolina, Naipaul visualizes the transformation of the past into religion and religion into politics. In this way,
he finds an answer to the tantalizing question of relationship of religion, history, and politics.

However, the most interesting outcome of the encounter between Naipaul and Applewhite is the experience of sacramental moment. As Applewhite, “cradles memories of his rich yet depleted past, Naipaul enters a condition of quasi-religious transport and recovers, rapturously, a childhood rendered dormant by denial” (Nixon 166).

Out of his intense contemplation of the physical world of his childhood – an act that made me feel close to him, though his world had not been at all like mine – and out of his separation from that first world of his, Jim, Applewhite had gone beyond the religious faith of his father and grandfather and arrived at a feeling for “the sanctity of the smallest gestures.”

(A Turn in the South 306)

Evidently, Naipaul in A Turn in the South deals with a Christianity, which is multi-faceted.

To reiterate, Christianity is Naipaul’s favourite religion. While he condemns the other religions including Hinduism, Islam, and African religion, he admires Christianity for its dynamism and inspiration, its role in motivating and sustaining the Western culture. In his early books, Naipaul projects the Christian progressive values against the ecstatic values of Hinduism. With the character of Ganesh, he underscores the superiority of Western capitalism inspired by Christianity over the Eastern feudalism inspired by Hinduism. In the other book The Suffrage of Elvira, Naipaul unfolds the inability of Hinduism and Islam to make an appropriate response to democratic institution of the Western culture energized by Christianity.
Naipaul continues his tirade against Hinduism to underline the superiority of Christianity in other works as well. In the story titled, “My Aunt Gold Teeth,” he shows how a staunch follower of Hinduism, Aunt Gold Teeth leans towards Christianity for getting a child and for the recovery of her husband from illness. In another story titled, “A Christmas Story,” Naipaul describes the conversion of a caste Hindu to Christianity for social uplift. Convinced of the inadequacy of Hinduism to deal with modern situation, the protagonist of the story becomes a Christian for the enjoyment of grace and dignity as well as the peace and culture of its ceremonies.

Before writing A Turn in the South Naipaul is content only to emphasize the forwardness of Christianity against the backwardness of Hinduism. Seldom if ever, he describes and discusses the intrinsic values of Christianity. While travelling in southern states of the United States of America, he comes to understand the religious aspect of Christianity. Even as an atheist, he realizes religion as an instrument of identity and a store-house of emotion as well as an ecstasy. He also grapples with such complicated questions as the relationship of the religion, history, and politics.

Evidently Naipaul defines Christianity as a religion of love and peace, joy, patience, goodness, meekness, and self-control. He also underlines the experiences of Christian meeting, brotherhood, union, formality rituals, clothes, music etc. While admiring the religious instinct of the southern people, Naipaul demonstrates Christianity as a way of life. At the same time, he underscores the element of grief in the southern Christianity, the grief felt at the defeat of the
Confederate. This grief reminds him of Christian Crucifixion and Martyrdom of Ali. While describing the visionary aspect of Christianity, he does not forget to remind the territorial nature of Christianity. In his discussion, Naipaul also articulates the frontier spirit and describes the sects inspired by this spirit. He goes on to mention the extinction of these sects, especially of the Church of Christ, and the Baptist Church, and their replacement by the Presbyterian Church. In the end in his meeting with the southern poet James Applewhite, Naipaul discovers the inviolable relationship between religion, history, and politics. Naipaul ends the book with a quasi-religious experience with the poet.
Chapter 4 – Endnotes


