

Incomplete portrait

by [Jane I. Smith](#) in the [September 9, 1998](#) issue

By V.S. Naipul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples.* (Random House, 408 pp.)

Though the elegant prose and engaging narrative style display V. S. Naipaul's usual grace, *Beyond Belief* has a heavy message: that many lives have been damaged and many spirits misguided by the essentially deadening forces of Islamic revivalism and extremism. In 1981, after an extended visit to Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia, Naipaul wrote the much acclaimed *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*. The new work is the result of a return trip to these countries. Naipaul revisits old conversations and old acquaintances to see how they have fared in the intervening years. The results are generally cheerless, and the thoughtful reader must struggle to discern the extent to which Naipaul's preconceptions determine both his choice of conversation partners and his presentation of his conversations with them.

The author does not attempt to hide his preconceptions. He sees Arab Islam as the most imperialist movement in history, leaving non-Arab Muslims forever detached from their native backgrounds and fruitlessly struggling to be more than just the "converted peoples" of the faith. Naipaul believes that the recent decades of Islamic revivalism have left the citizens of lands such as those he describes in a general state of spiritual disillusionment. Added to these convictions are his nostalgia for folk religion and culture and his deep regret at the steady passing away of the old world and its ways.

His critique of Islam in the Indian subcontinent is particularly sharp. He attributes to Islam the devastation of India proper and the dimming of its religious and cultural light. One wonders to what extent his own heritage--his family, who emigrated to Trinidad, was originally Indian Brahmin--is reflected in his commentary, which also targets for special criticism the establishment of the state of Pakistan.

Though the text was written before the beginning of Asia's economic crisis, it provides an unwitting yet relevant background for understanding some of the

causes of the catastrophe. One of the people highlighted in the Indonesian section is Indonesia's current president, B. J. Habibie, man of science and close confident of then president K. A. Suharto.

Principally, however, the book must be read for what it is--an account of time spent with men and women who reflect various responses to and degrees of engagement with the forces of Islamic "fundamentalism." Unlike many chroniclers of travel experiences, Naipaul does not sweep over vast areas and populations with broad brush strokes. The hours and days he spends with those whose stories he tells allow him to render them as exceedingly real people, not heroes or villains but humans struggling to make sense of movements and events and of their own mixed commitments and troubling inconsistencies.

Among the many people whose lives Naipaul briefly enters in Indonesia are Imaduddin, an electrical engineer and Muslim preacher who illustrates the new anticlerical Islamic form of leadership; the near-blind, charismatic Abd al-Rahman Wahid, whose influence among the Indonesian masses Naipaul significantly underplays; and Mrs. Mirta, the elegant founding editor of Femina magazine who expresses the sadness, disappointment and disillusionment that Naipaul seems to suggest is endemic among the converted peoples.

In Iran we meet Paydar, the revolutionary who saw his dreams fade in the aftermath of the cultural revolution; Abbas, child member of the martyr's battalions in the tragic Iran-Iraq war; and revolutionary hanging judge Ayatollah Khalkhalli, former butcher of Iranian citizens. Pakistani Marxist Saleem Shahbaz, foregoing his English public school education to fight in the ten-year guerrilla war in Baluchistan and Afghanistan, clings to a frail hope that commitment to truth will prevail. His sister, nameless and faceless, enters Purdah (seclusion) and covers herself completely with her khaki-gold cloak (perhaps, Naipaul muses, she wraps herself up to conceal a vacancy in her life).

Character after character adds pathos to this wonderfully constructed narrative, forcing readers to share the sadness of loss, of disillusionment and, most sharply, of lives given to seemingly endless and usually fruitless wars and conflicts. But I felt another kind of sadness: that the positive, constructive and hopeful elements of Islam as it is understood and practiced by the citizens of these four countries are hardly mentioned in the book.

Naipaul's picture of Islam among the converted peoples is not necessarily inaccurate; it is simply incomplete. And his presupposition that Muslims in the countries he visits have sacrificed their native traditions for a religion in which they can never fully share is a partial truth at best. The whole picture is both broader and considerably more hopeful than this artful but melancholy presentation might have us believe.