



# **Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples**

*V.S. Naipaul*

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"Brilliant. . . . A powerfully observed, stylistically elegant exploration." --*The New York Times*

A *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year

"The book's strength lies in Naipaul's extraordinary ability as a storyteller to draw striking portraits of a cross section of individuals."--*The Boston Globe*

Fourteen years after the publication of his landmark travel narrative **Among the Believers**, V. S. Naipaul returned to the four non-Arab Islamic countries he reported on so vividly at the time of Ayatollah Khomeini's triumph in Iran. **Beyond Belief** is the result of his five-month journey in 1995 through Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia--lands where descendants of Muslim converts live at odds with indigenous traditions, and where dreams of Islamic purity clash with economic and political realities.

In extended conversations with a vast number of people--a rare survivor of the martyr brigades of the Iran-Iraq war, a young intellectual training as a Marxist guerilla in Baluchistan, an impoverished elderly couple in Teheran whose dusty Baccarat chandeliers preserve the memory of vanished wealth, and countless others--V. S. Naipaul deliberately effaces himself to let the voices of his subjects come through. Yet the result is a collection of stories that has the author's unmistakable stamp. With its incisive observation and brilliant cultural analysis, **Beyond Belief** is a startling and revelatory addition to the Naipaul canon.

"Highly accomplished. . . . Another display of Naipaul's remarkable talent." --*The Independent* (London)

## Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples Details

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**V.S. Naipaul**



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## Cbj says

"Imaduddin was a lecturer in electrical engineering at the Bandung Institute of Technology. He was also an Islamic preacher."

These are the first two lines in this non-fiction book by V.S.Naipaul. Just two seemingly unremarkable lines. But when read together, they say a lot. The book is about Naipaul's travels across Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia. And what do these countries have in common? They were all non-Muslim countries/areas which gradually became Muslim through proselytization, invasion or partition (in the case of Pakistan).

Naipaul interviews people from various walks of life to find out how Islam has affected their present, how it has changed the way they view their past and their hopes for the future. The people interviewed include peasants, poets, newspaper editors, writers, basiji (Iranian suicide bombers), freedom fighters (the Pakistani communist who aligned himself with the Baluch tribesmen), killers (Ayatollah Khalkalli), businessmen and religious teachers.

Naipaul always maintained that his writing was driven by concern and not contempt. He is no fan of Islam (it had a calamitous effect on the converted people) or Islamic countries (he once called for the destruction of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran and recently called for the militaristic annihilation of ISIS). Naipaul's tone is grave - he knows that what he is witnessing is something that would not be easy to deal with and cannot be ignored. There is none of the cruel humor of his writings on India and Africa. Though he does take a dig at Western universities that provide security and free speech to Islamic preachers who want to give nothing in return. He is not like Henry Rollins or someone who went to Iran and said that he ate great ice cream.

Absent is the disgust (mostly at the squalor) with which he wrote about India. He even makes it clear that Indonesia is not like India - "We took the train to Jakarta. The Dutch-built railway station was well kept - Java was not like India". Though he is quite severe on a family of Pakistani honor killers.

I couldn't appreciate all of it because I know next to nothing about the history of Indonesia, Iran and Pakistan. And I'm no expert on Indian history either. I have also not studied Islam so I would have to take Naipaul's word on a lot of things.

But what I like about Naipaul is that he is like a hunter who only wants to hunt the big game. Some of the other major writers of his generation are happy hunting deer (borrowed from a quote by Julian Barnes). Naipaul is beyond such concerns. This is why his peers and even contemporary writers speak about him with a grudging respect. Everyone from John Updike and Hunter S Thompson to Marlon James are huge admirers.

It is not an easy book to read. Parts of it were irritating with some interviewees turning up late or not turning up at all. Some of the life stories were quite lengthy and contained boring details. But Naipaul is always observant and serious and nothing seems to escape him. And this book and its predecessor "Among the Believers" (which I read a few years ago) were certainly very prophetic when you consider the state of the world today.

I will end this review with a quote about Islam by Imaduddin, the Islamic preacher in Indonesia - "The Koran

is a value system. It's like a car. A car is a system. If you have only the tyre and the wheel you don't have a car. Islam is a system. You have to have it all. Or you leave it. You cannot be half-way Muslim or third-way Muslim. You become a Muslim wholeheartedly or not at all."

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### **Arvind says**

A 1996-followup to Naipaul's earlier travelogue thru Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran and Pakistan in 1981. This one is a little better and both have documented the times very well. All 4 nations r very different in their own ways and make for interesting reading.

It was interesting to note that while Pakistan was facing a horrible separatist revolt in Baluchistan and Karachi had turned into a war-zone in the 90s, it was exporting terror to Kashmir and militancy was at its peak in Kashmir then.

Wrt Indonesia (the nation of Indians ?) , it struck that they had local culture and customs all in the process of being white-washed by Islam ; the process which seemed to have been completed in Iran a while ago with the Iranian revolution. Indonesia struggles to trace its history, thankfully in India we had a handful of British enthusiasts who along with the Brahmins (some credit there) helped restore a good part of our history and culture.

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### **Drayton Bird says**

I got this book out of the library and put off reading it as it sounded like it might be hard work.

How wrong I was. Once I started I couldn't stop.

If you want to know why Islam has grown, and how and why so many happily kill themselves for it, this tells you - even though it was written well before the current lunacy.

That sounds a rather depressing recommendation, but the book is utterly fascinating - and made me understand why Naipaul won the Nobel Prize.

He goes into prodigious detail, never criticizes, only describes people's astonishing lives with a quiet but sympathetic irony.

As it happens I have spent time in three of the four countries he covers - Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia - and recognised many of the things he talks about.

His description of what had happened in the one I don't know - Pakistan - was deeply disturbing. It makes you realise what a disaster partition was -with the most appalling consequences, many surely yet to unfold.

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## **Abhishék Ghosh says**

Naipaul's keen sense of observation and ability to thread out the unspoken in the personalities he decides to interview is truly remarkable. He seamlessly zooms out of the events of one man's life to draw a broader commentary on the times and attitudes of an entire generation.

Naipaul is not leisure-reading. If you aren't paying enough attention, you might just feel like you woke up at midnight in the train bogey and realised that the train is suddenly moving in reverse and that you have no idea of where you're headed. Naipaul's chapters are not neatly arranged into an introduction, body and firm conclusion. It's more like an encounter, an afternoon conversation and afterthoughts melding into the next chapter.

It adds to the sense of confusion that the characters in *Beyond Belief* themselves portray- a juggling of ancestral traditions, contemporary Islam and militaristic politics. Special mention to the sections on Iran and Pakistan- they're WAY more engaging than the erratic outbursts of the Indonesian chapter. This man's got a Nobel, so go ahead and give him a read already!

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## **Andrew Rosner says**

Terrific look at Islam's effect on non-Arab countries that previously had different histories and cultures (e.g. Iran, Indonesia). Naipaul is a tremendous observer of the human condition and above all, a true humanist. Hard to disagree with his conclusion that Islam is the most comprehensive form of imperialism, in that it erases any history that precedes it. The chapter on Pakistan is devastating, and that was written over ten years ago.

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## **Jonathan says**

The stories are really interesting.

I don't think Naipaul's thesis is as accurate as he supposes (at least as he believed at the time he wrote the book). But there is truth there, I think, too. I think the religions and cultural heritages pre-Islam were probably quite as bad in some ways as Naipaul believes Islam is. But I don't think he takes this into account as much as he should.

In any event, I believe Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead 2000 years ago, so I believe in one truth, one reality, and my interpretation is going to be very different from Naipaul's and different from those of many of his critics.

I.e. I believe all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we have all gone our own way. Every single one of us. This means that we need God's grace and this grace has come in and through His Son, who is God, through his dying for sins and His rising to new life. There is no room for self-righteousness in this truth, no room for self-honor, only room for God's grace and the righteousness based on God's sacrifice.

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## **William says**

Terrific, 1999 sequel to *Among the Believers* (1981). Naipaul revisits, over a decade later, some of the men and women he interviewed for his first book, and many others, living in Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia. He reports on the pro-Westerners, followers of Islam all, as being if anything more embattled, while the Islamists are still more incongruous in their strenuous, sometimes hypocritical, attempts to follow and apply the admonitions of a fifth century book of spoken religious poetry literally to their own lives and behavior within the modernizing world. His depictions of Iran are a bit sad, but his observations of Indonesia, where the regime is more tolerant, can be quite comical. His observations of Islam in general, arriving as they did immediately prior to Al Qaeda's 2001 attack on America, I found chilling.

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## **Patrick McCoy says**

I felt compelled to follow up reading V.S. Naipaul's *Beyond Belief* soon after reading *Among the Believers*. so as have a sense of continuity. In this book, he re-visits the four converted Islamic countries (Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia) that he went to 14 years prior and tracks down some of the previous people he had interviewed before, as well as some new subjects. It seems as though he came away with a more negative impression than before, but perhaps I am mistaken. People in Iran are ruled by fear, the young generation seems to be rebelling against the repressive society. But it seems that the ruling elite are still in control in light of the recent election of a hardliner as Prime Minister. In places like Indonesia and Malaysia- Islamic influences do not mesh easily with the former animistic beliefs of the people who have essentially been colonized by a foreign "arabic" culture through Islam. Time and time again he emphasizes how the polygamy of the religion has traumatized countless families and made so many abandoned families miserable. He also emphasizes how this religion mistreats women who are discouraged from having any sort of independent life and relegated to the back rooms of the house to cook, clean, and raise the children while being discouraged to get any education. In Pakistan he looks at how Islamic justice is meted out by mutilation of women, honor killings, and the like. He discusses how impoverished people who have little are more strongly tied to honor and respect since there is little else in their lives. All this is recorded in great detail in a highly readable and engaging narrative. I'm looking forward to reading more of Naipaul's nonfiction.

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## **Rebecca says**

Myopic and racist.

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## **Eric George says**

This is a highly up to date travel study of four Islamic countries, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia. The journey was made in 1995, still the book has managed to stay applicable regarding it`s topic. The author V.S Naipaul traveled through Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia to meet people, and to talk with them, discovering their stories, their realities and lives. People have been prosecuted by their corrupt regimes and

Naipaul reveals their stories with sharp insight and a tutoring approach. The title of the book inclines that there is a focus on the converted people of Islam. More precisely they might not have done the action of conversion themselves but becoming a product merely of the imperialistic actions of Islam. It is stated that the origin of Islamic culture and people are the Arabic people and that those who have been imperialized are not in the descend bloodline of the Prophet. On his chapter travelling through Pakistan we get to know his narrative style to the fullest, exploring the shanty towns of Lahore in search for terrorists, working girls, lepers, people with names and the rich. Reading the lines and in between them, this chapter shows immense injustice and the great difference between the have nots and the wealthy. The author manage to bring those little stories up at a time and place in the novel that seems very accurate and neat. The alternating between people and their stories like an original Pakistani Marxist, hidden love stories between peasants putting a whole lot at stake, and Nomadic people in Baluchistan makes the book interesting and keeps the reader alerted. Put to the point as a criticism of Islam one could say Naipaul get to the point when he quote Saleem, the grandson of a rich farmer and cricket enthusiast, whom is able to name drop several Trinidadian cricket players states "there is no free will in Islam, Islam meant obedience, submission". One of the strongest arguments Naipaul presents are the fact that the converted people must forget and wipe their own past once they have converted. " But Islam seeks as an article of the faith to erase the past; the believers in the end honour Arabia alone; they have nothing to return to". The reader might not totally agree on all of the authors arguments, as when he presents the link between honour and poverty for reasoning about killing for honour. Naipaul is left with a quite shallow argument which could be more in depth as regarding logic and diversity. But it is as stated, a religion well for the people in position to misconduct their power and live an unmoral life, immoral maybe to the principles of Islam. The link between Islam and Arabic culture needs to be more thorough. But Naipaul statement is quite clear as he sees Islam as Arabic imperialism, because everything in Islam is founded out from Arabic culture and always looks in that direction. The non fiction book is also about people, their lives, their stories, and their hopes, whom despite religion are recognizable in everyone of us, as a human with compassion, self respect and knowledge.

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### **Chris Van Dyke says**

In 1995, Naipaul traveled through the four non-Arab Islamic countries (Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia) to explore how life has changed since the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini. His portraits are riviting and beautiful, though one must keep in mind Naipauls very conservative politics back home in India.

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### **Patrick says**

I only read the section on Iran, but much of that section - "Justice of Ali" - was fascinating (despite my reservations about Naipaul going into the book). It is extremely moving in its discussion of the 8 yr. war between Iran and Iraq. My big complaint is that Naipaul does not give Iranian women a voice. He only includes the voices of the men he has interviewed, and though he has the opportunity to interview women, he inexplicably chooses to leave their voices out (even as he acknowledges throughout the oppression and silencing of women in Iran).

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### **Sehar Moughal says**

If I had read this book a couple of years ago, I would absolutely disagree with Naipaul's observations. Now, I



am not so sure. What has changed? Well, I know a few Arab Muslim people and I am inclined to agree with Naipul. This quote sums up the main premise of the book:

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

While reading this book, I was trying to steer clear of my own personal experiences and my interactions with Arab Muslim people. Looking back, I think I was asking too much of myself. This means that my review is dripping with bias (and possibly resentment). I never doubted that how non-Arabs (such as I) practiced Islam was wrong until disagreements revealed otherwise. So, I can feel the pain of people who shared their experiences with Naipul. I think Arab Muslims have an image of what a good Muslim should look and act like - given our geographical dispersion and our genetic differences, non-Arabs can never be 'good' Muslims. Such a shame, me think.

In saying that, I think Naipul misinterpreted conditions to suit the premise of this book. At the beginning he mentions that this book is not about opinions but personal stories. Fine. Few chapters (or pages), he verbalises very strong opinions about all the four non-Arab countries he visited (Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia). After reading the whole book, I feel his negative remarks were not only directed towards the Arab Muslims but the Non-Arab Muslims too. How he laid down history, he favoured the white man colonisation over the Arab Muslims. Not cool.

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## **K says**

In the beginning itself Naipul asserts that the USA is the land of freedom and opportunity, where a Muslim preacher goes to theologically indoctrinate the university students of Indonesia. Islamic organisations in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia finance him.

In detail Naipul goes on to describe how rigorously the devout of Islam are expected to undertake the rituals of it. But, on a closer scrutiny, most of the religions are like that. None could be said to be more liberal, considered at a fundamental level.

The author talks of the people converted to Islam being more fundamentalist. It is similar with the people who are converted to Christianity, who outnumber by far the Islamic converts.

Hinduism, which has no place for conversion, if considered at its ritualistic level, has a strong violence concealed behind it. The ritual of animal sacrifice being one of the cases to mull over.

So, a discourse on religions is fraught with looking farcical, more so when an author wants to present one religion as superior than another, the one who belongs to neither. Such type of writing may be entertaining to read for some people. But it must not be considered a serious literature, as it inherently is prejudiced to serve the purpose of a few opportunists waiting to grab power, once this conflict of religions becomes more wide spread. It is more important to single out this flaw of the writers like Naipul, as the 'war against terrorism' is becoming more wide-spread and consuming almost the whole world.

Also that Gandhi learnt his social welfare ideas from Christianity, though he has been a devout Hindu all his life, is mentioned in this book. Naipul said it only in one sentence, without substantiating it in any manner. The Hindu way of life depends a great deal on the idea of society and family. How painfully Naipul had described it in 'A House For Mr. Biswas'.

Without a critical scrutiny, these two kind of opinions, supporting Christianity while criticizing Islamism

rigourourly and Hinduism passingly, I am not able to push down my throat.

In his lifetime itself, most of Naipaul's non-fiction could become irrelevant, as it dwells too much on the conflicts of religions. Also it is over-rated, for having claimed various literary awards, from a literary world too keen to find a work which confirmed to its long-held, fossilized notions of literature.

Unless you have a constituency of the readers, you can not do this kind of writing. It is like preaching what you already know, or pretend to know, instead of exploring deeper the people you seem to interview in the course of writing a travel-book. There is hardly a moderate, common man or woman, met by Naipaul, in this book so far. So, it all depends on the kind of people you want to meet. If they are in or around the offices of supreme power of a country with religious leaning, the opinions you discover might only conform your own prejudices.

The power writing has occasionally becomes over-bearing even for the best ones, and you want your share of the political-cake, instead of mere readership.

Two stars are for keeping the language simple.  
Shall the later part of the book be any better?

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### **Katie says**

Naipaul has an amazing ability to get people to reveal intimate details of their life stories - and then to thread the stories together to reveal deeper truths about a particular society. The section on Indonesia (where I live) was good, but the sections on Iran and Pakistan were particularly thought provoking and kept me reading late into the night.

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