

WHAT AN ISLAMIC JOURNEY!

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V.S. Naipaul - AMONG THE BELIEVERS: AN ISLAMIC JOURNEY

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By Prof. Khurshid Ahmad

The world of Islam is once again the focus of attention, not as is superficially suggested because of its oil and petro-dollars, but because of a new moral, cultural and ideological upsurge to remould Muslim life and society, and personal character as much as social institutions, in accordance with the vision of man and society given by Islam. The Muslim world is passing through a creative yet painful process of rebirth, represented most poignantly in the revivalist wave amongst the young — most of whom opened their eyes under Western or Westernising regimes of the colonial or post-colonial era, who were brought up under a secular system of education imposed by the Western rulers over Muslim lands and who had little exposure to Islamic sources or traditions, yet who are rediscovering Islam as the major source of inspiration in their lives and have become the spearhead of Islamic revival wherever you go, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Mindanao, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria! A lot has been said, mostly unsympathetically, about the reappearance of beards on the faces of Muslim youth and the re-emergence of Hijab and Chador amongst the girls in universities and bazaars, or about the alleged punishments and executions in certain Muslim countries: the real symbol of Islamic resurgence lies in the behaviour of the Muslim youth — in this effort to see their destiny in Islam. Islamic resurgence is not yet an accomplished fact; it is a reality in the making. The Muslim world is passing through a revolutionary period, yet the revolutionary process has only begun to unfold itself, and is not in the same phase in all parts of the Muslim lands. This fascinating phenomenon deserves to be understood; but the sad fact is that no one is interested in understanding it, particularly in the West. A plethora of books and articles and reports and travelogues has appeared. The communication industry is churning fast, adding more and more to the misinformation that already abounds. Visitors, onlookers, analysts and strategists are all engaged in creating a fantasy world of scare and indignation; contributing precious little to the understanding of the revolution that is going to shape the future of the Islamic world. Everyone is trying to see things from the vantage point of their own lives or vested interests. It is a pathetic situation.

Naipaul, a man of letters, could have been an exception. But is he? Has he been able to give us any real insight into modern Islam? Has he succeeded in fathoming the hearts and souls of the Muslim young men and women, 'the believers', and in unveiling to the world the ethos of a faith that is moving its younger generations? Let us see!

V.S. Naipaul, an 'unbelieving' Hindu writer from Trinidad, who has made a name through his beautiful literary writings, and who has spiritually and culturally migrated from his ancestral home, India, to his cultural home, London, has, after spending several months in four Muslim countries, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, just produced an interesting and revealing travelogue: *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*. The book is interesting, as it is written in a lively style which makes absorbing reading. It is also revealing, if not of the true ethos of the 'believers' (around and not amongst) whom the writer lived for some six months and about whom he has written, at least of the mind and attitude and the prejudices of their Western inquisitors. Naipaul stands for more than himself — he represents an approach that deserves to be carefully examined if one is to know the tragedy of Western understanding of

Islam. His work is all the more interesting because it comes from an Indian convert to the Western culture whose cause he now espouses with the zeal of a new-born! That makes *Among the Believers*, not just 'an Islamic journey', but something of a confrontation between two new-borns: Western and Islamic!

What is wrong with the Western approach towards Islam? In a nutshell, it is a conglomerate of ignorance, prejudice, misinformation and rage, visibly rising out of arrogance and the fear of challenge to certain vested interests, political or economic supremacy, sprinkled here and there with a little courtesy or sympathy. This may be an effective way of condemning a people; but can it be of any help in understanding them?

Reports about the Islamic revolution in Iran, as told on American TV, spurred Naipaul to undertake this heroic journey into Muslim lands. Did he prepare himself well for the undertaking? How much did he know about Islam and Muslim history, about the people he wanted to see and explore. 'It could be said that I had known Muslims all my life', he claims, 'yet I know little of their religion'. He regards himself as a man 'without religious faith'. His impression of Islam was that of a 'religion of fear and reward, oddly compounded with war and worldly grief'. The doctrine did not attract him. 'It didn't seem worth enquiring into' with the result that in spite of many travels, he had added 'little to the knowledge gathered' in his childhood (p. 16) which, as one finds out to one's chagrin throughout the book, was next to nothing. He did not even know that Avicenna was a Muslim or a Persian philosopher (p. 12).

His perception of Islamic history is that the 'glories of this religion' were in 'the remote past; it had generated nothing like a Renaissance'. He has no idea of the cultural flowering of the Muslim civilisation over the centuries, or of the role Muslim learning and science and technology played in bringing about the European Renaissance of which he is so enamoured! To him Islamic history can be summed up in a little phrase: 'conquest first, Islam later' (p. 121). He claims that Muslim countries 'that were not colonised were despotisms, and nearly all before oil were poor' (p. 16). He has no knowledge that the per capita income of most of the Muslim countries till the mid-nineteenth century was higher than that prevailing in most of the European countries. Not a word about the despotic nature of Western colonialism; but the Muslim countries which could not be colonised by the Western Imperialists — Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan to be more specific, were all despotic. Even his knowledge of the five pillars of Islam is pathetic; he claims that Hajj is rooted in 'old Arabian tribal worship' (p. 105). He uses the term 'Friday Sabbath' *ad nauseam*, not realising that Friday and Sabbath have no relationship at all. Friday is a day of work as much as a day of collective prayer. There is no obligatory fast connected with Friday, as in the Jewish Sabbath. But he even goes to the extent of talking about 'Muslims not observing the Sabbath' (p.227). What does he intend in this usage — to show his masterly indifference to Islamic terms or his abysmal ignorance of them? He regards Islam as imperialism par excellence (pp. 125—26, 135), suggesting that the people accepted Islam as a permanent bondage. But if a people's acceptance of a faith and culture is imperialism, then the history of every civilisation is a history of imperialism. And if people's acceptance of Islam as their faith makes Islam imperialistic, what about the conversion of men like Naipaul to Western values and culture? This, of course, represents the triumph of freedom, liberalism and universal civilisation!

His knowledge of Islamic history is exasperatingly and astonishingly poor; or is it deliberate that he does not even check his 'facts' from Hitti's History of the Arabs which he pompously refers to in a particular context (p.372). Whatever he has to say about the spread of Islam, its parallels with the conquests of the Roman Empire, the story of the advent of Islam to Sind, have no relation to historical reality. His bravado is staggering! He unabashedly uses books like Chachnama, and has the audacity to claim that its narrative about Sind before Islam smacks of 'fairy tale' (p. 126), but whatever in that 'fairy tale' is disparaging to Islam, he presents it as gospel truth. He dismisses the idea that religious scholars can offer any contribution to constitution-making and makes the fantastic claim that 'a constitution was, after all, a concept from outside the Muslim world' (p.24). Does he not know that the first written constitution of human history was the Mlthaq al-Madinah enforced in the first year of the Hijra; and accepted by the Muslims and Jews of Madina as the constitution of the State?

He has no perception of the Islamic educational system. He is amazed when he is told in Qom that students of the Islamic universities study for six years. 'What did they study all that time', he blurts out in astonishment (p.28). He never bothers to check his figures or dates. Mr. Jinnah died three months after Pakistan was established (p.93). In fact he died in September, 1948, thirteen months after independence. Bhutto's weight was reduced to 80lb. in Lahore jail. Bhutto appeared before the Supreme Court in Islamabad more than six months after this 'fairy tale' in Lahore prison, and there was no trace of this slimming. Pakistan, he claims again and again, has a literacy rate of 15 per cent (p. 108). The actual rate is 32 per cent, and for his information, it was 100 per cent till the advent of British rule, which destroyed the old system of education and established the new system under which literacy is what it is, almost the same rate in Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India, Pakistan slightly better! Muhajir is translated as 'stranger', as 'foreigner', and Muhajirs in Pakistan projected as outcasts.

He claims that the majority of those who migrated from India had settled in Sind (p.96), again a travesty of facts. The bulk settled in Punjab. He claims that Mr. Bhutto was 'the country's first native leader' (p.86). What does he mean by 'native leader'? Can he identify how many of the Heads of State or Government in Pakistan were 'non-native'? Ayub Khan? Yahya Khan? Hasan Shaheed Suharwardy? Feroz Khan Noon? Khwaja Nazimuddin? Ghulam Muhammad? Chaudhry Muhammad Ali? Muhammad Ali Bogra? On his criteria is one going to be described as 'native' only if he comes from Sind and from no other part of the country? And Sind has also produced Ghulam Husain Hidayatullah, Ayub Khuro, Abdus Sattar Peerzada, all elected in their own times. What type of reportage is this?

Naipaul's fury as well as his ignorance know no bounds when he comes to talk about Mawlana Mawdudi. He describes him as 'the patron saint of the Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan' (p. 158), whose name is referred to with reverence by the new-born wherever Naipaul goes, Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia. Naipaul claims that Mawdudi opposed the creation of Pakistan (pp.158, 349) which is patently wrong. Mawlana Mawdudi, along with Allama Iqbal, was amongst the greatest critics of territorial nationalism and the Akhand Bharat strategy of the Indian National Congress. He was amongst the founders of the two-nation theory and had presented his own scheme for the partition of India in 1938, two years before the 1940 resolution. Naipaul conveniently overlooks all historical evidence and

repeats what the anti-Mawdudi lobby has been saying. He does not care to learn anything about the immense intellectual contribution Mawdudi has made but is quick to pass judgment that Mawdudi 'campaigned for Islamic laws without stating what those laws should be' (p. 158). Is he not aware of works spread over two-thousand pages from Mawdudi dealing only with Islamic law and state and a selection from which is available even in the English language (Islamic Law and Constitution). He claims that Mawdudi never gave 'a practical programme'. If he has chosen to see only the Manifesto of the Jama'at-i-Islami and not the entire literature produced on this theme, he might have felt some qualm of conscience in making some of these absurd claims. He scoffs at Mawlana Mawdudi's death in a US hospital (again the city's name is incorrect!) as something 'against all his principles' and shows his weird sense of humour (which he laments he could not find in Pakistan journalists (p.371)) when he says about the Mawlana that 'he had sought to reap where he had not wanted his people to sow' and 'that he had gone to his well-deserved place in heaven by way of Boston, and that he went at least part of the way by Boeing' (pp. 158-59).

I have quoted these masterpieces of good taste because a number of reviewers of Naipaul's book in the Western media have found them delightful enough to meticulously specimen them. Naipaul is upset about Khalkhali whom he ridicules as 'a hanging judge' (as if judges in the Western world sit to release and honour criminals and not to administer the law). But at least Khalkhali gives the person a hearing before judging him. Not Naipaul and his executioners of Islamic fundamentalism. They judge and execute even without giving their victims a hearing! Who said that Mawlana Mawdudi was against modern medicine or modern technology, that he did not want to sow in the Western lands? He busied himself in sowing in the East and in the West, and he was lucky enough to see the crop greening with his own eyes. He visited Europe and America a number of times and the Islamic upsurge amongst the youth who have lived in the cultural wasteland of Europe and America — not merely the born-Muslims, but also Europeans and Americans who have embraced Islam — represent the blossom.

And what have men like Naipaul to say if their own criticism (such as it is) is directed back at them? You are opposed to the so-called Islamic fundamentalism; you condemn and ridicule it. But you go to Muslim lands to report on the same accursed fundamentalism and pocket the huge royalties as mana from the skies. Who is seeking to reap where he had not wanted to sow!

Naipaul starts his story from Iran. What does he know of the country? He confesses 'I hadn't followed Iranian affairs closely; but it seemed to me, going only by the graffiti of Iranians abroad, that religion had come late to Iranian protest. It was only when the revolution had started that I understood that it had a religious leader' (p. 14). Equipped with this knowledge of Iranian history and the role of religion and religious leaders in contemporary Iran, Naipaul feels free to judge the Islamic revolution of Iran. Who were the vanguard of revolution during the Qajar rule, the Ulema or the secularists? Who fought for the 1906 constitution, the Ulema or the standard-bearers of the West? What was the role of the Ulema during and after the Mussaddaq revolution in the early fifties? What was the famous uprising of Qom in 1963? Who paid with their sweat and blood? Understandably, Naipaul could not find anything about this in the 'graffiti he knew of! He didn't even trouble to read the works of Nikki Keddie and Hamid Algar, easily available in America and the United Kingdom.

What is Naipaul's understanding of the Shi'a faith and practice? 'The Shias', he claims, are 'the supporters of Ali and Ali's defeated cause (in its beginnings a political cause, an anti-Arab cause within the expanding Arab empire) (p.161). To describe Shi'a as anti-Arab is to betray a dismal ignorance of Islamic history and of the central significance of ahi al-Bait (the family of the Prophet) to the Shi'a creed. Similarly it is outrageous for any Muslim, Sunni or Shi'a, to read Naipaul saying 'The Shia faith in Iran... was the religion of the insulted and the injured' (p.383). The author's prejudice against Islam is writ large on almost every page of the book. He claims to be an unbeliever, an unprejudiced' observer of all religions, but all his biting sarcasm, all his venomful fury are reserved for Islamic fundamentalism, the Islamic revolutionaries, the Islamic law and economy. Yet one feels a totally changed atmosphere when he is describing Hindu and Buddhist influences in Malaysia and Indonesia, a Hindu Ghatt in Karachi, the Dutch efforts to revive dead Hindu culture in Java and Sumatra, even the obnoxious prophecies of the Qadiyanis. His rage against obscurantism finds no target in Rabwah or in religions other than Islam. To point out his double-standard would doubtless be an act of fundamentalism!

His prejudice against Islam and anything Islamic is surprising. He is quite at home with anyone who is a rebel to Islam. But the Islamists he simply refuses to understand. Even in Malaysia, where he seems to be least irritating, he is not prepared to peep into the hearts and souls of the sweet young men of ABIM whose moral excellence and whose creative energy dazzles him but even that does not awaken him to the force that has transformed these youth. Nothing opens his eyes. He believes the travel agent who told him that everybody is running away from Iran and if he is going to Iran he will have the entire plane to himself. But the flight to Tehran was full. But his eyes remain closed. He believes that after the revolution Iran has ceased to work. Tehran had become an idle city. He sees people working and is amazed at that. But his perception remains unchanged. He complains again and again that the Iranian revolution is simple rage and fury: it has not produced any institutions. He is witness to Pasdarane Inqilab, the Komiteh, the Constituent Assembly, two referendums, a new constitution, Presidential elections, parliamentary elections, yet he claims no institutions have been produced in Iran. The purpose of his Islamic journey is to understand a people amidst revolutionary change. But he has judged them even before embarking upon the journey. Iran to him is only a land of executions. He cannot see executions that are going on around him in Latin America — in Argentina, in Chile, in Cuba, in El Salvador, in Brazil, in Guatemala, in Nicaragua. He admits that the revolution in Iran is threatened from within and without. That Communists have infiltrated the ethnic minorities and are mobilising them for rebellion. But he does not allow that the custodians of the revolution should defend the revolution against all these threats. He is not prepared to see that a revolutionary situation has its own demands, its own dynamics — Islamic or otherwise. Loss of life in the Russian revolution, or even before that on the occasion of the French revolution, or even before that in democratic Great Britain, in the name of the glorious parliamentary revolution is understandable. But anything that is done to protect the revolution in Iran cannot be but 'a wicked turn'.

Naipaul is at home with Behzad, a communist, as his interpreter in his quest for Islamic understanding in Iran. How could Islamic Iran open its heart to him? 'What had begun so unpromisingly wasn't going to end well.' He came to Iran, to Pakistan, to Malaysia and Indonesia and had no means of directly communicating with any of the people. The young

editor-in-chief of Iran Week was more perceptive than our globe-trotter whose advice Naipaul records but conveniently ignores. 'He said' writes Naipaul, 'to understand Iran I should go to the holy city of Qom and talk to the people in the streets. I said I couldn't talk Persian, he said they couldn't talk English. So there we were' (p.29). Whoever tries to understand a people in this novel way is surely destined to fail. Can it be anything other than a dialogue between the deaf and the dumb: an exercise in futility!

Naipaul's prejudice and rage assume rather torrential proportions in his descriptions of Pakistan. In Qom he tries to hide his Hindu ancestry from the Pakistani students for fear of unsettling them. He surmises: 'the Hindu-Muslim antagonisms of the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent went deep' (p.51). This is borne out eloquently in his description of Pakistan, which to him is 'a fragmented country, economically stagnant, despotically ruled, with its gifted people close to hysteria' (p.82). The whole history of Pakistan, from 1947, as seen by Naipaul, is nothing but 'the absence of representative government; the land of the faith turning into a land of plunder; the growth of regionalism; rule by the army in 1958; the bloody secession of far-off Bangladesh in 1971' (pp.82—83).

In Iran, it was 'money, and the foreign goods and tools that it bought' that gave 'an illusion of Islamic power'. In 'Pakistan poverty had the same effect' (p.85). He is incensed that 'in the new state only the armed forces flourished' (p.86). He is all praise for the 'despotism' of Bhutto (p.86) and bitter about the 'despotism' of Zia and the 'thuggish public life of the Muslim polity' (p.94).

There was no Islamic experiment for him to see in Pakistan. Faith was providing only simple negatives that answered emotional needs (p. 154). He moves with the idea that 'Pakistan was built on hate and nothing else' (p. 116). He ridicules Martial Law and Islam in the same breath: 'public floggings were decreed and there was no nonsense this time about eye witnesses. The army sent out whipping vans to bazaars; instant law, Islam on wheels' (p. 159). He simply does not want to see that there was no relationship between whipping under Martial Law and the Islamic penal law. Martial Law was using its own law and was drawing upon the rules made during the British period and not under Islamic law. But who cares for facts. Naipaul has to kill two birds with one stone — army and Islam. So he claims 'step by step, out of its Islamic stirrings, Pakistan had undone the rule of law it had inherited from the British' (p. 159).

Pakistan, to him, is a tottering, disintegrating country, only because it claims to stand for Islam. The economy is in shambles, it is a 'remittances economy'. Everyone is running out 'leaving the land of faith for the lands of money'. The whole description is jaundiced; it is sickening. The author has no interest in facts, no perception of historical processes. Pakistan may be a poor country, but its economy during the last four years has been stable and expanding. Its per capita income is higher than that of India. Migrant labour is not unique to Pakistan. Labour is on the move from India, Bangladesh, Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Algeria, Morocco, etc. Labour is moving even from the UK; over the last ten years emigration from the UK has been greater than immigration! People are going from Europe and America to the desert lands of Arabia. Does all this represent movement from the land of the faith? Labour migration is a historical phenomenon. The United States and Canada, much of Australia and New Zealand, owe their lustre to population migration. Naipaul and

hundreds of thousands like him came to Central America and the Caribbean from far-off lands. All this is acceptable. Not so with Pakistan.

Naipaul's double standards are once more prominent in his description of the role of the army in Pakistan and in Indonesia. He is vehement in his condemnation of army rule in Pakistan and uses every nasty epithet he has in his armoury. But when it comes to Indonesia, where the army has suppressed Islamic uprisings and is eager to impose Western civilisation on an Islamic people, his tone and fervour are wholly redirected, his principles turn upside down:

'Now the army rules. The khaki-coloured army bases are everywhere... It is the army that holds the archipelago together. And army rule — after the Sukarno years of drift and rhetoric — has given Indonesia fifteen years of rest. In this period, with the help of Indonesian oil, Jakarta has sprouted its skyscrapers; The main roads have been paved; the beginnings of services appropriate to a big city have appeared. In this period of rest there has grown up an educated generation, the first generation in fifty years to know stability' (p.280).

Again, a little later another bouquet of roses for the army: 'And now, with the army peace, with the growth of identity and learning, with the coming to Indonesia of the new technological civilisation...' (p.285).

Army rule in Indonesia is all blessing; army rule in Pakistan is anathema. If Naipaul's repugnance to military rule is motivated by his love for democratic institutions, as we had expected, why these two diametrically-opposed reactions? Or is the reason hidden in the army leadership's attitude towards Western civilisation — Suharto is suppressing the forces of 'born again' Islam and playing into the hands of the Western powers, so army is peace and stability, and Zia is talking of Islam (even though only talking and not doing enough), so army in Pakistan is a source of instability and destruction. Technology in Indonesia is welcome; technology in Pakistan becomes Islamic bomb? Who said prejudice, and double-talk and double-think are the monopoly of the politicians?

Coming back to the central theme of the book, one finds that Naipaul's treatment of what he calls Islamic fundamentalism is equally prejudiced and jaundiced. He has nothing but dislike and rage or, at best, scathing pity for the forces of Islamic resurgence. He is unable to see things in their historical perspective. He assumes that the Islamic upsurge has burst into existence almost out of nothing. It cannot offer anything positive. It is guilty of oversimplification. It has no vision of the future, no programme for action, no comprehension of the challenges of the times. It is fanaticism writ large. He fails to understand why the universities are swept by this wave. Why so many educated people are supporting it. How people educated in Europe and America are 'converted' to the new faith. He cannot comprehend this phenomenon, because it does not fit into his categories of thought. So instead of critically re-examining his categories of thought, his tools of comprehension, he chooses the easier path, the path all defenders of the status quo have pursued in the past, from the persecutors of Socrates, the Pharisees of Jerusalem, to the

Inquisitors of medieval and post-medieval Europe. He condemns them. He ridicules them. He salutes those who persecute them.

If we try to analyse his problem, it seems his real obsessions are two: first, he looks upon Islam as one more religion, in the Western sense of the word. He cannot see how a faith and a religion can be more than a private affair, more than something personal between God and man. How faith can give rise to a civilisation. How faith can lead to the establishment of a just social order. Throughout the book this confusion comes up again and again. He does not raise this objection to communism and socialism. He looks upon them as social ideologies. But religion to him is at best a matter of personal belief and morality; how can it set the pace of social ethics and fashion political and economic order? His concept of religion and that of those whom he calls Islamic fundamentalists differ radically. The two are not on the same wavelength. That is why, in spite of his alleged Islamic journey, he remains innocent of Islam.

It should also be kept in mind that Islamic resurgence is not a simple, linear phenomenon. The Muslim world is witnessing a number of developments, some of a conflicting nature. The people and the rulers are not moving in the same direction. There are internal tensions, and the struggle in which the forces of revival are engaged is a long and multidimensional struggle. In spite of many achievements, the present phase remains one of struggle.

His second confusion arises from his concept of civilisation. He thinks that Western civilisation is a universal civilisation and it is suicidal even to think of an alternative. He fails to differentiate between the foundations and value-framework of a civilisation and its technology and material manifestations. To him rejection of materialism means renunciation of all technological expressions of the Western civilisation. Here again one finds a total absence of historical perspective. Western civilisation is not the only civilisation man has known. Arnold Toynbee has examined the rise and fall of twenty-six civilisations (*A Study of History*). Pikirim Sorokin has studied thirty-four civilisations. Most of these civilisations, in their own times, were dominant civilisations, some even universal. But they could not last for ever. The worshippers of every civilisation thought at the heyday of its power that it would never decline. But it did. History is the graveyard of many a dominant universal civilisation.

As far as the Western civilisation is concerned, it is no longer at its height. It has passed its zenith. This civilisation is in the throes of a crisis; the process of disintegrating is unfolding itself. Naipaul seems to be still living in the confident age of the nineteenth century. What the world has witnessed from the First World War does not seem to enter his world. He remains a brave Victorian litterateur in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Again, there is a lot of confusion in the way he handles the relationship between civilisation and technology. Western civilisation drew upon the technology of its own predecessors, even upon the technology of civilisations alien to it. But it assimilated that technology in its own framework and further developed it. The splitting of the atom in our time is no more revolutionary a development than the discovery of fire or the invention of the wheel were in their time. These three technological developments took place in the cradle of different civilisations, but the later civilisations have built upon the fruits of the earlier ones. Islam wants to make use of all the common experiences of mankind. The Islamic civilisation would

assimilate in its framework all those technologies as well as cultural traits from other systems which can be harmoniously absorbed in its social system, without impairing its value.

What is unique is the value-base of the Islamic civilisation. Islam rejects the value-base of the Western civilisation in the same way as Western civilisation rejected the value-base of the medieval Christian civilisation. But the rejection of the Christian civilisation did not mean rejection of the entire technology that existed at that level of civilisation. Modern Western civilisation absorbed the thought of the Greeks, the law and state organisation of the Romans, the science of the Muslims, and yet transformed them to become something new in its own framework. Others have an equal right to do so. Technology is not the monopoly of a certain people; it has to be the servant of all people prepared to harness it.

There is no contradiction in the approach of Muslims to Western civilisation. They reject its value-premises. They reject its materialism. And these are rejected not only by us, but also by many human beings who believe in God and absolute values, whether they are in the East or the West, in Asia or Europe, in Africa or the Americas. The issue is cultural and valuational. What the author has time and again said about 'rejection and dependence' is a product of his own confusion. And it is the result of these confusions that he has not been able to see the real face of Islamic resurgence. He seems to have walked amongst the Muslims blindfolded. The book does not throw any real light on the nature and significance of Islamic resurgence. In the last analysis, his has been a journey in fantasy. Among the Believers remains a book of fiction.

How blindfolded this exercise has been, is astonishingly clear as Naipaul, on reaching the mountains of Kaghan, bypasses the Afghan refugees — he bargains over the price of their raw woollen carpet, but fails to see the Islamic resistance to Russian occupation in Afghanistan. The most heroic expression of Islamic rebirth is to be seen in Afghanistan, where forces of Islamic resurgence are fighting Communism, which Naipaul's guide Behzad is offering as an alternative to Islam. The West, in spite of all its abhorrence for Communism, is prepared to prefer the bear's embrace to working out a modus vivendi with the new-born Islam. The choice as Naipaul sees through Behzad, is between the 'Mullah' and the Communist. He makes no secret that he would prefer the latter even if it involves 'a lot of killing'. But he and his Behzads, are totally mistaken. It is Islam and not any inversion of it that is going to be the destiny of the Muslim world. The struggle in Afghanistan has clinched the issue and is going to set the pace. But Naipaul bypasses that and in choosing to do so has exposed the dilemma that besets the West. In its overt reaction to the imaginary spectre of Islamic fundamentalism, it is opening the gates for Communism. But the Muslims are destined to make their own choice; no one else is going to choose for them. And it may be better for the West too, to keep its options open.
