

V. S. Naipaul On Islam: A Florilegium

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The writer V. S. Naipaul died a year ago, on August 11, 2018, at the age of 85. A novelist, travel writer, essayist, and historian, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. His most important works, for me, have been the two books he devoted to studies of Islam and Muslim peoples. *Among the Believers* (1981) reports on a six-month trip he took through Iran, Pakistan, Malaya, and Indonesia after the Iranian Revolution both reflected, and inspired, the new fundamentalism among Muslims. *Beyond Belief: Excursions In the Lands of the Converted Peoples* (1998), was a study of how Muslims in Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaya had fared in the roughly twenty years since Naipaul first wrote about them.

Here's a florilegium of Naipaul's observations on Islam. They

do not date:

1. In a speech he gave at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, on October 4, 2001, Naipaul claimed that Islam had both enslaved other peoples and attempted to wipe out other cultures. **“It has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples. To be converted you have to destroy your past, destroy your history. You have to stamp on it, you have to say ‘my ancestral culture does not exist, it doesn’t matter’.”**

He claimed what he called **“this abolition of the self demanded by Muslims was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity. It is much, much worse in fact... You cannot just say you came out of nothing.”**

He argued that Pakistan was the living proof of the damage Islam could wreak.

“The story of Pakistan is a terror story actually. It started with a poet who thought that Muslims were so highly evolved that they should have a special place in India for themselves.

“This wish to sift countries of unnecessary and irrelevant populations is terrible and this is exactly what happened in Pakistan.”

From V. S. Naipaul, Speech, October 4, 2001

And similarly:

“It [Islam] has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples. To be converted you have to destroy your past, destroy your history. You have to stamp on it, you have to say ‘my ancestral culture does not exist, it doesn’t matter’... This abolition of the self demanded by Muslims was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity. It is much, much worse in fact... You cannot just say you came out of nothing...”

“The time before Islam is a time of blackness: that is part of Muslim theology. History has to serve theology.”

From *Among the Believers*

2. "I think when you see so many Hindu temples of the tenth century or earlier time disfigured, defaced, you know that they were not just defaced for fun: that something terrible happened. I feel that the civilization of that closed world was mortally wounded by those invasions. And I would like people, as it were, to be more reverential towards the past, to try to understand it; to preserve it; instead of living in its ruins. The Old World is destroyed. That has to be understood. The ancient Hindu India was destroyed."

"In art and history books, people write of the Muslims 'arriving' in India as though they came on a tourist bus and went away again. The Muslim view of their conquest is a truer one. They speak of the triumph of faith, the destruction of idols and temples, the loot, the casting away of locals as slaves."

From *India: A Wounded Civilization*

3. "While the Ottomans moved into South-East Europe, the Moghul invasion of India destroyed much of Hindu and Buddhist civilization there. The recent destruction by Moslems in Afghanistan of colossal Buddhist statues is a reminder of what happened to temples and shrines, on an enormous scale, when Islam took over."

From *India: A Wounded Civilization*

4. "India has been a wounded civilization because of Islamic violence: Pakistanis know this; indeed they revel in it. It is only Indian Nehruvians like Romila Thapar who pretend that Islamic rule was benevolent. We should face facts: Islamic rule in India was at least as catastrophic as the later Christian rule. The Christians created massive poverty in what was a most prosperous country; the Muslims created a terrorized civilization out of what was the most creative culture that ever existed."

“How do you ignore history? But the nationalist movement, independence movement ignored it. You read the Glimpses of World History by Jawaharlal Nehru, it talks about the mythical past and then it jumps the difficult period of the invasions and conquests. So you have Chinese pilgrims coming to Bihar, Nalanda and places like that. Then somehow they don't tell you what happens, why these places are in ruin. They never tell you why Elephanta Island is in ruins or why Bhubaneswar was desecrated.”

From V. S. Naipaul in *Economic Times*, 13 January 2003

5. “In India, unlike Iran, there never was a complete Islamic conquest. Although the Muslims ruled much of North India from 1200A.D. to 1700A.D. in the 18th century, the Marathas and the Sikhs destroyed Muslim power, and created their own empires, before the advent of the British...The British introduced the New Learning of Europe, to which the Hindus were more receptive than the Muslims. This caused the beginning of the intellectual distance between the two communities. This distance has grown with independence...**Muslim insecurity led to the call for the creation of Pakistan. It went at the same time with an idea of old glory, of the invaders sweeping down from the northwest and looting the temples of Hindustan and imposing faith on the infidel.** The fantasy still lives: and for the Muslim converts of the subcontinent it is the start of their neurosis, because in this fantasy the convert forgets who or what he is and becomes the violator.”

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

6. “**Indian intellectuals have a responsibility to the state and should start a debate on the Muslim psyche.** To speak of Hindu fundamentalism, is a contradiction in terms, it does not exist. Hinduism is not this kind of religion. You know, there are no laws in Hinduism.”

From: *India: A Wounded Civilization*

7. "Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's world view alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his..."

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

First published in