

Naipaul, Religion, and The Masque of Africa: Intersections of Religion and Literature in the Postcolony

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Abstract

This essay explores the intersections between religion and literature in V. S. Naipaul's works with a focus on his 2010 publication, *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief*. The essay brings Naipaul's earliest novel, his most recent work, and his Nobel Lecture into conversation with each other to show the relationship between religion and society in his works. It argues that Naipaul's fictional and travel writings are important resources for understanding the crucial ways in which politics and religion intersect in colonial and postcolonial societies. Since religion and literature were part of the wider colonial enterprise, they must be part of the process to address the havoc created by that enterprise.

Vidia S. Naipaul is probably the most famous extant author in what is known as the travel genre. The Trinidad-born Nobel laureate's body of fictional and non-fictional work spans the globe. It covers such spaces as Africa, Argentina, his native Caribbean, ancestral India, and the Islamic world. In *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* (2010), Naipaul returns to Africa after a forty-two year absence to remap Africa's sacred geographies. He explores the phenomenon of religion, an element of his work from his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, published in 1957. Naipaul specifically defines the work under review as a "book about the nature of African belief" (Naipaul 2010: 3). With a considerable body of work, fictional and non-fictional, in which the subject of religion has featured, Naipaul has situated his reflections on religion within the framework of societies

that have recently emerged from colonialism. In particular, he has explored how religion operates in these emergent societies, the way in which it functions in the postcolonial order. In *The Masque of Africa*, Naipaul focuses on the African world, from Uganda that became independent in 1960s, around the same time that his native Trinidad and other Caribbean countries became independent, to the Republic of South Africa that began its democratic journey in 1994. Naipaul does not leave us to define the central question of his work. He actually states the central question that integrates his work and gives it narrative coherence. From Uganda, he writes:

Foreign religion, to go by the competing ecclesiastical buildings on the hilltops, was like an applied and contagious illness, curing nothing, giving no final answers, keeping everyone in a state of nerves, fighting wrong battles, narrowing the mind. And it was possible to wonder whether Mutesa himself, if he could come back, mightn't have thought that he had made a mistake, and that Africa, left to itself in this matter, might have arrived at its own more valuable synthesis of old and new. (Naipaul 2010: 7)

This question shapes the book's theme and content. The persistence of fragments of African beliefs, ritual, and tradition demonstrates that centuries of colonialism have failed to erase African traditional worldviews. In the process, Naipaul's denunciation of the disastrous effects of colonialism and the various nationalisms attempting to replace it is manifested. Implicit in Naipaul's comment is the understanding that religion is a matter of construction. In terms of Naipaul's discourse, religion is about order, the way in which a culture or society is ordered, how it works well. The Third World for Naipaul is characterized by disorder. Zones of disorder are the outcome of the conquest and colonialism of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, Americas, Africa, and Asia. The uprooting and displacement of Africans and Asians through the Atlantic slave trade and the system of East Indian indentured labor also contributed to the disorder. "Area of darkness" is Naipaul's classic phrase for such areas. The purpose of this essay is to explore the intersections between religion and literature in Naipaul's recent publication, *The Masque of Africa*. Its focus is not on the controversial Naipaul since so much has been written on that subject. However, failure on the part of Naipaul's work to generate debate might be an indication that his critics now take him for granted. Hopefully, this is not the case. The position of this essay is that Naipaul's latest publication, *The Masque of Africa*, deserves serious study because it shows the crucial role that religion plays in social formation.

Religion and the Colonial Order

It is axiomatic that religion played a pivotal role in the construction and maintenance of the colonial order. The debate over who had or did not have religion was an important part of the equation of creating colonial peripheries related to metropolitan centres (Chidester 1996). A variety of explorers, writers, missionaries, and others who developed the travel genre played an important role in the colonial project. All appearing in *The Masque of Africa*, John Henning Speke (1827-1864), David Livingstone (1813-1873), Richard Burton (1821-1890), Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904), Mungo Park (1771-1806), Mary Kingsley (1862-1900) Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), and Paul Belloni Du Chaillu (1831-1903) were explorer-writers who traveled through the Africa they perceived as the “Dark Continent” and opened its frontiers to Western penetration. They did more than construct a sensationalist portrait of the continent. They opened up the continent to the modern West, mapped or surveyed the continent, and laid the foundations for what is called today, African Studies. In *The Masque of Africa* Naipaul goes beyond his antecedents to revise and update African religious culture in the post-independence era. A significant aspect of the book is that Naipaul provides the opportunity for African voices to articulate their religious perspectives, and the way in which they see them in relation to non-African religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam. In other words, a process of reversal takes place in the book in which the Africans talk back to those who previously treated them as silent. As the African voice articulates its presence, Naipaul poses challenging and provocative questions. This process of reversal in which the colonial order and its religious formations are called into question or de-centered started at the beginning of Naipaul’s career, and has intensified as he has matured as a writer. It has become more articulate as Naipaul has grown older and recognized the fundamental thrust of his work.

This process started when Naipaul defined his own native Trinidad as an “area of darkness” and set out to deal with the problematic of darkness through travel. “Areas of darkness” can be described as spaces in which one is conscious of the gradual loss of one’s ancestral culture, with the accompanying sense of dislocation and personal and social degradation that follows from this loss. In religious terms, they can be described as spaces of exile or alienation. Conscious of the impact of the loss of the traditional Hindu worldview on his personal identity, Naipaul develops the ability to detect religious charlatans in his quest to overcome the darkness. His first novel, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), is his initial exploration into the subject of religious quackery. Naipaul’s work made an important contribution to understanding the religious charlatan in the evolution of colonial societies. Since religion lies at the base of colonial social formation, the religious charlatan either keeps the society as a dependent periphery or makes it an active participant in reforming the world.

Ganesh Ramsumair, the protagonist in *The Mystic Masseur*, is a symbol of the hero in the colonial polity. The name Ganesh symbolizes the Hindu elephant god who is the “remover of obstacles.”¹ Ganesh is consulted for success in a person’s future endeavors. Naipaul’s Ganesh illustrates the successful crossing of the Atlantic or the Kali Pani as Hindus refer to it in Hindu mythology. The Hindu deity Ganesh successfully crossed the Atlantic because he was needed for Indians of Hindu descent to survive in Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean. The deity was needed for the people to adapt and to conjure a sense of their own culture within the wider plantation society. In other words, Ganesh’s mythology was needed for cultural reproduction in the Indo-Trinidadian diaspora. Naipaul’s Ganesh is a signifier of the culture. Ganesh’s evolution as a person is synonymous with the colonial culture in which he is located. As a metaphor for Trinidadian society, *The Mystic Masseur* represents the containment of colonial Trinidad and the struggle against containment.

The novel’s narrator meets Ganesh when his mother takes him to the pundit masseur to heal his infected foot. By that time, Ganesh, the frustrated writer and failed teacher, has fortuitously followed in his late father’s footsteps and established a reputation as a masseur. Ganesh’s career takes off and he becomes “all things to all people.” In a colonial society such as Trinidad of the 1950s, his popularity leads to a successful political career and Ganesh is elected as a member of parliament. Ganesh has charisma since he knows the power of traditional religion to mobilize displaced peoples. With such power, he cannot be ignored in a colonial society. But at the height of political success, Ganesh displayed how power corrupts. He surrendered his connection to the masses and thus his political effectiveness when he became a Member of the British Empire (M.B.E.) and member of the Executive Council. He abandoned his “truth” as a solution to the society’s problems. The “new” Ganesh relies more on ideas than on intuition.

The tragedy is that a colonial hero and “great fighter for freedom” like Ganesh turns out to be a disappointment by showing that his ultimate political motivations were about self, not service. The narrator recalls that in 1954 while waiting for the results of an examination at an English university, he received a letter from the Colonial Office to host G. R. Muir, Esq., M.B.E., a statesman from the narrator’s territory, who was a member of a group of Colonial Statesmen meeting in Britain for a conference. On the appointed day and time the narrator is waiting for his guest at the London railway station. He has no difficulty recognizing his guest “impeccably dressed, coming out of a first-class carriage” (Naipaul 2002: 208). Recognizing his childhood hero, Pundit Ganesh, who had inspired his passion for books, even though he failed to heal his swollen foot, the narrator runs toward him and addresses him as “Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair!” In return, he received a cold response, “G. Ramsay Muir” (Naipaul 2002: 208).

G. Ramsay Muir is a tragic example of the “darkness” that Naipaul has fought against in his literary career. The light of recognition turned to darkness when G. Ramsay Muir, the mask of Pundit Ganesh, denied his past and cultural heritage. Although Naipaul does not dismiss the need for self-fashioning in the face of colonialism, Muir’s behavior is an extreme example of the alienation the author wishes to expose and conquer.

The empire produced a model of political leadership that was alienated as Muir. In the process, political elites like Ganesh became mimic men who could not resolve basic social conflicts. The empire “struck back” by containing G. R. Muir, the former “great freedom fighter.” Ganesh abandoned the Hindu religious identity that was instrumental to his political ascent when he became a Member of the British Empire (M.B.E.). As a member of the empire, he abandoned his salient link to the masses and took on a new body politic.² He dressed differently and read political theorists rather than religious texts (Naipaul 2002: 203). He became a member of the Executive Council, severed from popular politics, and limited in his potential to effect political transformation in Trinidad. Ganesh succeeded in rewriting his history but not Trinidad’s.

The Ganesh-type political creature has resonances throughout the Caribbean as well as in the colonial and postcolonial world. History has shown that the former revolutionary can turn out to be conservative and authoritarian. Ganesh is a very plausible character that mirrors the hopes and aspirations of his own ethnic group and the “inward hunger” of the Trinidadian and Caribbean masses to overcome the limits of colonialism.³ He is a symbol of the colonial era in transition to the postcolonial era. However, in the midst of his apparent success, he turns out to be a kind of “failed messiah” and tragic figure. He represents the concrete hopes of people like himself who are contesting the darkness. However, Ganesh cannot be defined as an ultimate failure. Although he betrays the hopes and aspirations of those who saw him as a symbol of the postcolonial order, he represents the dilemma of the political leader in the colonial order. Ganesh’s story is a cautionary tale.

Pundit Ganesh represents the religious connection between Naipaul’s feelings of alienation and the darkness he experienced growing up in colonial Trinidad. Traveling and writing become his twin strategy for overcoming the darkness of alienation. Naipaul, whom we can associate with the narrator of *The Mystic Masseur*, discovers that the political order and humanity are so intertwined that to transform one without the other is inconceivable. He discovers that reality as a student in England when he meets G. R. Muir, Esq., M.B.E in London during the summer of 1954. When he called his guest “Pundit Ganesh!” he was trying to recover his roots and overcome the alienation of a lonely Londoner. Pundit Ganesh shipwrecked the narrator’s project with his cold response, “G. Ramsay Muir” (Naipaul 2002: 208). Since colonialism does not recognize indigenous

religions, the incident referred to in the epilogue to *The Mystic Masseur* represents a breakdown of synthesis between student and colonial statesman in London. A little over half-a-century later, the incident correlates with Naipaul's question whether "Africa, left to itself in this matter, might have arrived at its own valuable synthesis of old and new" (Naipaul 2010: 7).

The epilogue to *The Mystic Masseur* echoes the voice of Frantz Fanon in his classic, *The Wretched of the Earth*, when he wrote, "Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity" (Fanon 2004: 145). Toward the end of his work, Fanon also wrote, "For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man" (Fanon 2004: 239). Although Naipaul and Fanon belonged to different regions of the Caribbean, they understood the seductions that the colonial order offered to characters like Ganesh.⁴

Naipaul's literary exposés have earned him a lot of the opprobrium he has rightly deserved. His struggle against darkness has in turn brought out much that readers and critics find dark. Without this lifelong struggle against darkness, the world would never have known Naipaul, and he would never have known the world.⁵ This project of combating darkness is appropriate to Africa since in the Western imaginary it has been the "Dark Continent" from the days of European colonial penetration. Arguably, this Western gaze, one that still persists, legitimated Western colonization of Africa. African New World slavery was also justified on the grounds that it was a preparation to send the enslaved back to Africa to liberate the continent from darkness.

Travel writing was an important part of the missionary enterprise. While Naipaul has no missionary interest, he is clearly interested in the legacy of such enterprise, as indicated by his question. He quickly proceeds to answer his question with the comment that "it wreaked havoc." To show the havoc, Naipaul takes his reader on a trip through contemporary Africa. In the process, Naipaul maps African sacred geographies as he has seen them since his 1966 visit to Uganda. However, more is involved in Naipaul's understanding of the travel genre than an exposé of interesting people.

Homer's *Odyssey*, with its theme of the outward and inward journeys, of wanderings and homecomings, is a significant classical antecedent in the travel genre. Naipaul's reference to his native Trinidad in *The Masques of Africa* echoes the thematics of departure and return to an apparent center. Trinidad is the home space from which Naipaul set out on his quest to overcome the darkness of colonial Trinidadian space. From Trinidad, he earned a government scholarship to Oxford where he studied at University College. Trinidad, named after the Holy Trinity because Christopher Columbus first sighted the island on the feast day of the Trinity in 1498, was also the port from which Spanish explorers and Sir Walter Raleigh set out to find the legendary city of El Dorado on the South

American continent, with its legendary king who was clothed in gold (Naipaul 1969). Trinidad was also the site from which the British planned to spread revolutionary ideas throughout the Spanish New World Empire in the late eighteenth century. While it is worthwhile to wonder whether Naipaul's *Masque of Africa* also signifies on classical and other travel literature, it is plausible to consider that he is engaged in a critical revision of earlier travel writing on Africa. The notion of historical reversal in the emergence of the post-colony is implicit in Naipaul's work. As the writings of various European travel writers were part of the wider colonial enterprise, Naipaul's works such as *The Masque of Africa* can be seen as part of a wider agenda of decolonization.

European naming or renaming of new worlds in America or Africa in Western Christian terms signifies the centrality of religion in conquest and colonization narratives. According to Naipaul, that "wreaked havoc" on Africa. Naipaul does not excuse Islam from this discussion. If, as Naipaul argues, foreign religion wreaked 'havoc' in Africa, writing is an important act in salvaging the self from the abyss of darkness. Writing is a process of regeneration (Theroux 1972: 9-34). The thrust of Naipaul's argument resonates with the saying that "the pen is mightier than the sword." In his 2001 Nobel Lecture, he aptly said,

When I became a writer those areas of darkness around me as a child became my subjects. The land; the aborigines; the New World; the colony; the history; India; the Muslim world, to which I also felt myself related; Africa; and then England, where I was doing my writing. (Naipaul 2001)

Building on the subject of his writing, he went onto say, "That was what I meant when I said that my books stand one on the other, and that I am the sum of my books" (Naipaul 2001). Appealing for understanding, he said, "And I think you will understand how complicated it was for me as a writer. Especially in the beginning, when the literary models I had—the models given me by what I can only call my false learning—dealt with entirely different societies" (Naipaul 2001). The pattern in Naipaul's work only became clear to him a couple months before his Nobel Lecture when "passages from old books" were read to him and he saw the connections (Naipaul 2001). Arguably, Naipaul's meeting with his own voice liberated him from further writing from the perspective of the colonizer. It was a virtual metamorphosis or conversion for Naipaul. Much of the controversy surrounding Naipaul has been over his apparent contempt for the Third World. *The Masque of Africa* represents a highpoint of his apparent development of a Third World or postcolonial consciousness in which his empathy for the oppressed is explicit. Nevertheless, it must be considered that Naipaul has always had a Third World or postcolonial consciousness in which

religion has been significant. His first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, and his most recent travel writing, *The Masque of Africa*, bracket the theme of religion in his work.

For Naipaul, writing breaks through the containment of darkness and alienation (Bhabha 1990: 4). The island is a small and contained space in relationship to the world beyond. Although the center of one's gaze, the island directs vision beyond the horizon. The quest for totality is basically religious.⁶ Writing has been Naipaul's basic strategy to overcome alienation.

Religion, as alienation, offers false knowledge of oneself. Naipaul has used writing as a weapon to transcend his feelings of alienation. To do so, Naipaul undergoes a process in which he (1) confronts darkness, (2) travels through "areas of darkness," (3) writes and revises the works of previous authors, (4) recovers lost or forgotten fragments of experience, culture, and history, and (5) undergoes experiences of personal reconstruction through the creation of his distinctive worldview. In other words, Naipaul's works reflect the formation of his personal, religious, and philosophical worldview. Writing, for Naipaul, is also a process of transcending darkness. His writing remaps the boundaries of consciousness. It is a cognitive revolution in which Naipaul mirrors the heartbeats and longings of those who reside in darkness. Since "darkness" is the central metaphor in Naipaul's writing, it is not surprising that his work tends to be clinical, problematic, and ultimately provocative. Naipaul's writing involves a kind of hermeneutical cycle of meaning.

Firstly, what distinguishes Naipaul from other Caribbean and postcolonial writers is the central metaphor he uses to analyze colonialism. Naipaul's point of departure for the writing process is the encounter with darkness. His writing, therefore, engages in the primordial struggle between darkness and light. At the human level, a radical and risky openness is required to deal with the darkness. Naipaul's work, fictional and non-fictional, cannot be understood without an appreciation for the central role of the conflict between light and darkness in his work. As a process of confronting darkness, writing is a critical strategy of liberation from colonial containment.

Secondly, travel is also method of breaking down colonial containment and its darkness. The journey that Naipaul embarked on when he left Trinidad in 1950 for University College, Oxford, was away from a center of darkness in search of the light. However, in his quest for transcendence, Naipaul encountered the geographical span of darkness. To Naipaul, darkness was social and concrete. It was embedded in the social constructions, conflicts, contradictions, relations, and patterns of control in a colonial society like Trinidad. Darkness was part of the stultifying vision that came with life in a plantation society. You either fought the darkness or succumbed to it. Writing and travel have been Naipaul's strategies for dealing with darkness. "Darkness" is actually Naipaul's choice

metaphor for colonialism. Ganesh Ramsumair, the colonial hero who struggles against it in his search for humanity and authenticity, ends up as G. R. Muir, Esq., M.B.E., or what David Chidester calls an “authentic fake” (Chidester 2005). The darkness is extensive.

Thirdly, writing became integral to his encounter with darkness in Naipaul’s travels.⁷ For a lifetime, it has been his main way to unmask darkness and its causes such as colonialism. Naipaul studied the models he received, whether through his colonial education or otherwise, and created his own models to name the world as he saw it. This probably earns him the title of phenomenologist. In *The Masque of Africa* Naipaul revises the work of a number of well-known travel writers from the eighteenth to the early-twentieth century, the Golden Age of European colonization of Africa. His central question offers a fresh angle of vision as the author takes the reader through the book’s chapters. From the perspective of postcolonial Africa, the question is provocative and possibly subversive, to say the least. On the one hand, his central question raises the issue whether the West needs to revise its historical colonial gaze and construct a new imaginary for Africa. On the other hand, Naipaul implies that Africans need to develop their own indigenous syntheses.

In his Nobel Lecture, Naipaul acknowledged the centrality of darkness as a theme in his writings. Methodologically speaking, the path to light is through darkness. The new is not possible without confrontation with the darkness. The darkness of Trinidad was Naipaul’s point of departure on an existential and literary journey in search of the light contained by colonialism. The Swedish Academy’s Bio-bibliographical note identified the significance of the Nobel Laureate’s work in its statement that “Naipaul extended the geographical and social perspective of his writing to describe with increasing pessimism the deleterious impact of colonialism and emerging nationalism on the third world” (Swedish Academy 2001).

Naipaul’s critics have tended to ignore the relationship between darkness and deprivation in his work. Unfortunately, the struggle to overcome various forms of deprivation by Naipaul’s fictional and non-fictional characters is overlooked. Their struggles for humanity and the intersections between religion and the challenges of everyday life are ignored. Religion and politics operate together in those spaces where people struggle to preserve their humanity and dignity in the face of forces that make them vulnerable and threaten their existence. In those two domains, people’s hopes are often exploited and sabotaged by religious and political charlatans who beguile them. However, the relationship between someone like Ganesh and the people is symbiotic.

In Ganesh, Naipaul created an ostensibly religious character who tapped into popular imagination but eventually disappointed those who relied on him for deliverance (Nightingale 1987: 111-113; Theroux 1972: 9-10). However, the

masses also tapped into Ganesh's imagination. Ganesh and the people part ways when asymmetry enters their shared vision. Nevertheless, the work of the imagination continues despite the social catastrophe Ganesh represents.

As noted, Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* is a critique of political charlatans like Ganesh Ramsumair. A year after its publication, the West Indian Federation made up of British colonies in the Caribbean was established with a federal parliament headquartered in Trinidad. It was a political fiction that tried to give the colonies a sense of autonomy without granting them sovereignty. The fictional Ganesh Ramsumair represented the new wave of politicians that preceded the transition from the colonial to the federal order. They were a kind of liminal political agents who became extinct by the time West Indian Federation floundered in 1962. As long as the empire still ran the local show, "men of the people" like Ganesh, situated between the colonial and independence eras, could be co-opted and duly rewarded by the British colonial order (Naipaul 2002: 207). The writer C. L. R. James, referring to Ganesh Ramsumair, declared that Naipaul "makes no bones about showing up this politician as a charlatan and ignoramus. . . . I am left with the impression that Naipaul has an attitude which is ready to pour ridicule on politicians of all kinds, Indian, African, colonial or European" (James 1958). James challenged his Guyanese audience to invite Naipaul to what was then the last South American outpost of the British Empire (James 1958).⁸ Patrick French, Naipaul's authorized biographer, claims that when Naipaul published *An Area of Darkness*, James remarked, "Naipaul is saying what the whites want to say but dare not. They have put him up to it" (French 2008: 245). My aim here is not to enter into debate with James but to reaffirm James' positive regard for the potential of writers like Naipaul to lead the Caribbean out of darkness into light.

Impressions of Religion in Postcolonial Africa

As already mentioned, *The Masque of Africa* signifies on the writings of a number of travelers whose writings were part of a wider enterprise. Their work did much to define the way in which Africa was imagined in the modern world by using the nature of African belief as a benchmark to justify colonization. Through writings, lectures, and public speeches, travel writers, missionaries and others legitimated colonization and mobilized support for colonialism's cause. Their representation of Africa significantly impacted Western perspectives on Africa to the present, shaping the relationship between African and non-African worlds. Has the relationship shifted since independence and the demise of colonialism? Since Naipaul can speak on behalf of both the colonizer and the colonized, his pursuit of 'the nature of African belief' positioned him to question the previous African travel writers' representation of Africa. Furthermore, he implicitly positioned

himself to investigate whether there has been change in the relationship between African and non-African worlds.

Most likely, during his formative years growing up in colonial Trinidad, Naipaul imagined Africa by reading the classic literary lens through which he now revisits Africa. The lens contained a missionary and imperial gaze. They justified empire, religion, and colonization. Simultaneously, it portrayed Africa as the “dark continent” from which the ancestors of Vidia’s Afro-Trinidadian schoolmates were brought as slaves to work on the sugar plantations of the West Indies. In due course, the argument was that they were brought to be Christianized, and later to be sent back to Africa to liberate it from darkness. Officially, the colonial project was not about racial domination and exploitation, especially the expropriation of cheap African labor to develop capitalism at the dawn of the modern world. The end of the Atlantic slave trade and the emancipation of slaves throughout the British Empire in the early 1800s resulted in a labor shortage on British sugar plantations throughout the world. To fill the void, the system of East Indian indentured labor was designed in which thousands of Indians were shipped to the West Indies and the British colony of Natal, South Africa. As a descendant of East Indian indentured servants in Trinidad, Naipaul knew well the role of religion in the colonial enterprise. As a student at Trinidad’s elite Queen’s Royal College (QRC), Naipaul well knew the conjoint role of civil servant, soldier, clergyman, and schoolmaster in the maintenance and promotion of the colonial order. All this had to be part of his education since its goal was to prepare him to find his place in the empire. All this he knew. But he also knew the underbelly of the colonial order, and its negative impact on his ancestral Indian culture. Amongst other things, the religious underpinnings of his Hindu culture, with its organization of daily life and society, were falling apart. Not only was there a sense of loss and displacement, the Trinidad in which Naipaul grew up was an “area of darkness.” In reality, religion was by no means separate from culture. Whatever vestige of religion Indo-Trinidadians or any other ethnic group in the island held onto symbolized their resistance to colonization and their struggle for revitalization. Naipaul learned of the negative effects of colonialism early in his life, and subsequently translated these lessons into his writings and worldview.

This sensibility of darkness or loss of one’s culture and consequently of oneself has been a central theme in Naipaul’s work. No wonder that religion has been one of his major themes and constant angles of analysis. From his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, to his latest non-fiction piece, *The Masque of Africa*, Naipaul has addressed the religious question in relationship to society. What does it mean for a people to lose their ancestral religion? It is not difficult to imagine that Naipaul would claim that such loss would necessarily result in their extinction. As an intuitive writer, however, Naipaul is not the type of author to

provide a simple answer. As the best living writer in the English language, he knows the importance of posing a great question. In so doing, he follows what might be called the heretical imperative. History has shown that without this heterodox imperative, life remains static and the transformative or regenerative dynamic of religion is silenced.

In reading *The Masque of Africa*, the careful reader should not be distracted by preconceived ideas about Naipaul and his well-known literary idiosyncrasies, including his views on the Third World. For example, the author's sensitivity to the predicament of animals in Africa should not be considered an affectation of English cultural sensibility. Is it possible that Naipaul is a bit more sophisticated here in suggesting that the quality of a society can be measured by the way in which it treats animals? The question is worth consideration. Nevertheless, what is more critical as Naipaul takes his readers through the geography of religion and everyday life in Africa begins as he describes the religious landscape of Kampala, Uganda, where he lived in 1966. In reflecting on King Mutesa's religious decision as public policy in nineteenth-century Uganda, Naipaul clears the space to introduce the core question that gives his work narrative coherence. Looking at Kampala's sacred landscape, with its Christian and Muslim religious buildings, Naipaul finds foreign religion pathological, "an applied and contagious illness." Providing "no final answers," foreign religion is illness rather than cure. In a nutshell, foreign religion is an agent of darkness (Naipaul 2010: 7). Naipaul's critique of foreign religion clears the space to make a retrospective entry into Mutesa's mind to ask a number of critical questions: Did Mutesa himself make a mistake in allowing foreign religion into his country? Would Africa have arrived at its own more valuable synthesis of old and new if it had been allowed to make its own religious decisions? (Naipaul 2010: 7).

Naipaul's questions are critical. They contest the traditional wisdom that colonialism and other Western initiatives in Africa were to the continent's benefit. He does not have to deal with the Inquisition in posing his questions. But he probably has to deal with those who will be disappointed that his work does not justify the colonial enterprise and the role of religion in it. Nevertheless, the provocative Naipaul persists if the careful reader is willing to engage the author's interventions and reflect deeply on his well-crafted questions, such as, "Why had the foreign-revealed religions wrought such havoc with African belief?" (Naipaul 2010: 7). The revolutionary thrust in Naipaul's questions is that they make an intervention on behalf of the alienated spirit that contests the darkness created by colonialism. Naipaul's questions interrogate and subvert the darkness of colonial existence, and point toward the possibility of regeneration, both individually and collectively (Henry 2000: 109-10). Naipaul's questions are radical and relevant at this historical juncture. Decades after decolonization, it is not inappropriate to speak of neo-colonialism. Naipaul's questions position him

to interrogate the historical moment and to interrogate it through the religious lens in Africa. Naipaul's questions resonate with African governments' request to the West to allow Africa to implement its own strategies for development and self-determination. His questions on the rupture of African culture and its own impulse toward old and new forms of religious synthesis, with the resulting havoc on the continent, challenge popular understandings of the role of non-traditional African religions in the continent's history. When someone with Naipaul's reputation poses such questions, it is worthwhile to ponder what he writes. Was Western or other religious penetration of Africa beneficial to the continent? The overall impression is that Naipaul's answer is in the negative. Ultimately, Naipaul's questions ask whether Western and other religious penetration in Africa have led to its liberation when such havoc has been caused for African traditional religion.

From Uganda, with its multi-religious landscape, Naipaul takes his reader to oil rich Nigeria and its religious complexities. In Nigeria, there is an initial note of enthusiasm until one encounters the element of satire on Nigerians tendency to travel with too much luggage. In Nigeria he confronts us with the theme of suffering, especially with respect to the treatment of animals throughout Africa. This is not just an adoption of English manners with respect to animals. On the contrary, it is a genuine critique of Africans' treatment of animals (Naipaul 2010: 78). Their relationship to animals and nature is an index of their humanity. In Nigeria, Naipaul encounters the Yoruba religious tradition with its echoes of the African-descended presence in his native Trinidad. There is the city of Ife, the *axis mundi* or center of the world for the Yoruba people (Naipaul 2010: 96).⁹ But there are also echoes of his native Trinidad in the Shango religious tradition found in Trinidad as well as in its local forms in the islands of Grenada and Cuba (Naipaul 2010: 98). The north-south conflicts in Nigeria are as much about religion as they are about the scramble for control of resources.

From Nigeria it is on to Ghana, where Naipaul's admiration for Jerry Rawlings is apparent. Naipaul finds his ideas about the spirituality of language compelling. Rawling's understanding of the relationship between language and cultural integration resonates with Naipaul's sense of the darkness that befell the Indo-Trinidadian community when its relationship to its ancestral culture and language started to slip (Naipaul 2001). Addressing Naipaul, Rawlings opines:

Chief, I want to tell you about language, how important it is. There is a spiritual quality to language, to words. If you use language as a tool to suppress the people it will lose all its spirituality. There is a special quality to the language of our ancestors, and we have lost that by having another language

imposed on us. Our mother tongue has historical elements, and words were important. (Naipaul 2010: 143)

Rawlings speaks on Naipaul's behalf. He responds implicitly to Naipaul's central questions when he argues that respect for African culture leads to effective social cohesion. The imperial voice is absent in Rawlings' argument that respect for the logic of a culture sustains social integration and promotes order against chaos.

Naipaul's comments on the Ivory Coast are noteworthy in light of the recent political conflicts in the former French colony. His reflections on the Ivory Coast show the role of myth in constructing and legitimating political power. Myths sacralize monarchs. They make them unquestionable and unchallengeable. Religion, as sacred power, is therefore strategic in legitimating authority. Naipaul is instructive when he states that a particular myth cannot exist on its own, but needs other myths to support it. Sacred kingship has a long history in Africa. There is a tendency for the country's leaders to legitimate their authority as a divine appointment. Laurent Simone Gbagbo, who succeeded Houphouët-Boigny, the Forest King, as president of the Ivory Coast, converted to Christianity, and eventually saw himself as divinely appointed rather than democratically elected by the Ivorian people (Smith 2011).¹⁰

In Gabon, Naipaul situates his audience in the African heartland where he shows the cultural and religious degradation that is ongoing in the country as a result of deforestation. In Gabon, the forest is the *axis mundi*, the center of the world. The religious life of the pygmies and other Gabon people is centered in the forest. Destruction of the forest will lead to the destruction of the people's way of life and cultural system. Naipaul sees the darkness he has dreaded since his childhood days encroaching in Gabon. Tragedy is looming. But the country has witnessed earlier tragedies, including the attitudes of missionaries toward the indigenous people. Albert Schweitzer is the prime target of Naipaul's rage. His portrait of Albert Schweitzer, though far from flattering, is probably accurate. The missionary position does not respect the native culture. Naipaul's indictment of Schweitzer reflects his sense of solidarity with Africans:

Set beside Mary Kingsley and Dr. Nassau, Dr. Schweitzer doesn't shine. Among Africans his reputation, which has lasted down to our own time, is that of a man who was "harsh" to Africans and was not interested in their culture. This perhaps is the true mystery of the man: not his ability in 1915 to turn his back on the civilization of the time (though the 1914 war might have been a factor), but the almost—almost heroic—idea of his own righteousness that enabled him to live apart in Africa for all that time: the ideal of the missionary

taken to its limit, the man less interested in serving men than in beguiling them. (Naipaul 2010: 204)

The missionary's attitude to native culture is probably a reflection of escapism and individual salvation. Naipaul's portrait of Schweitzer segues into South Africa, the culmination of his African travels. Schweitzer's position of aloofness is a symbol of the apartheid system that was officially institutionalized in South Africa between 1948 and 1994. In the historical scheme of things, South Africa is a newly emergent postcolonial nation in Africa. Since the end of apartheid should have resulted in the creation of new, democratic subjectivities in South Africa, the conclusion to *The Masque of Africa* is crucial. What has South Africa made of its liberation? Have social relations in South Africa changed since 1994? Yes and no. Naipaul's comments on the Rainbow Nation are significant.

The writer's task is to the work of the scholar of religions whose task is to critically reflect on the role of religion in social formations. In Naipaul's terms, the writer was important in the process of liberating colonial societies from darkness. C. L. R. James' arc of insight crosses the decades and manifests itself in *Masque of Africa* where Naipaul explores the contradictions of African societies through the lens of religion. His book appropriately ends in South Africa where he unearths contradictions in the society almost two decades after the end of apartheid.

Naipaul takes the reader through a whirlwind tour of South Africa. The tour culminates in Naipaul's conversation with Rian Malan and his reflection on Malan's book, *My Traitor's Heart*, which are crucial to the resolution of *The Masque of Africa*. The perspicacity Naipaul has developed over the years in throwing light on colonial darkness has empowered him to identify a significant flaw in South Africa's new national project through his interactions with Malan, who introduced him to the work of the Afrikaner writer, Herman Charles Bosman. Malan gave Naipaul a copy of Bosman's *Mafeking Road*, which Naipaul reads and notes the suppression of African pain in its rendition of the national narrative (Naipaul 2010: 216-217). In the post-apartheid era, Malan seems to be involved in a reversionary process similar to Naipaul's. As Naipaul signifies on earlier travel writers, Malan signifies on Bosman, whose work was written a year before the institutionalization of official apartheid in 1948. Concluding with an extended summary of the conclusion of *My Traitor's Heart*, Naipaul passes the baton to Malan:

It may even be that in this parable the writer is finding a way of saying something quite difficult: that after apartheid a resolution is not really possible until the people who wish to impose themselves on Africa violate some essential part of their being. (Naipaul 2010: 241)

The significance of Naipaul's regard for Rian Malan, a South African of Afrikaner heritage, is its relevance to Naipaul's work that recognizes the devastation colonialism wreaked on both colonized and colonizer. Since both sides shared in the devastation, both must find creative ways to transcend the darkness together. The project is relevant to reverse South Africa's apartheid legacy now that globalization has replaced colonialism. Naipaul's reference to the people who wish to impose themselves on Africa correlates with his question whether the continent, left to itself on the question of religion, "might have arrived at its own more valuable synthesis of old and new" (Naipaul 2010: 7). More than wanting his readers to appreciate that cats were sacred in Ancient Egypt or that cutting down trees resonates with the birth of tragedy in classic literature, Naipaul wants his readers to work towards transcending the pain, inhumanity, and violations of the modern world (Chidester 1996: 15-19; Nightingale 1987: 120-21).

Conclusion

Writing is Naipaul's religion. It is the only thing he has done throughout his life. As his muse, it drives him and he is totally possessed by it since it is his way of being human in the world. To read Naipaul's works is synonymous with reading his personal religious or philosophical worldview. The following statement by Naipaul from Patrick French's authorized biography clarifies the author's position:

I think that we have in us a cumulative conscience, a sort of birthright of the human race. We do know what is right and what is wrong: stealing, adultery, infidelity, killing a member of one's own people or tribe (you can kill as many of the opposite types as possible!), lying and dishonesty. The cliché virtues are common to all races, and their observation in the breach is common to all races, too. Now don't feel that I want to reform the human race. I am a spectator, the *flaneur par excellence*. I am free of the emancipatory fire. I want to create myself, to work out my own philosophy that will bring me comfort. I want to see the good and bad. (French 2008: 103-04)

Although Naipaul's statement sounds individualistic and self-centered, there is a clear indication of identification with "the wretched of the earth" in *Masque of Africa*.¹¹ Around the central questions of the book dealing with indigenous religion, we find Naipaul concerned with environmental degradation and its impact on indigenous culture (180-89, 201), the treatment of animals (78, 157), sensitivity to the status of women in Islam (110-13), religious prejudice (125), culture loss (131-33), and the legacy of South African apartheid in the country's

history of pain, struggle, and unresolved issues (210, 218-221, 237-41). His embrace of pain and suffering in the African condition supports John Thieme's argument that Naipaul's has worked "towards a third-world consciousness" and the "decolonization of personality" (Thieme 1975: 21). According to Naipaul,

I've decolonized myself through the practice of writing, through what I've learned from writing, looking at the world. But let me add also to this that I feel an enormous pain about the situation. (Thieme 1975: 21)

In a kind of Buddhist mode of analysis, Naipaul says that life is pain. For him, the writing process, his method of decolonizing himself, led to his feeling "an enormous pain about the situation." What does one do with the pain that is enormous? I think that the pain Naipaul feels allows him to embrace the world, enter into solidarity with it, and invite his readers to share in that pain. In other words, his writing destabilizes the colonial self and releases powers of solidarity necessary for the construction of the postcolonial world. Consequently, Naipaul does not take refuge in some abstract theodicy. He suggests implicitly that colonialism is a kind of religious construction of reality in which pain and suffering are denied or bracketed out of human consciousness. His comment on the ambiguity in the narrative of the Voortrekker Monument and Herman Charles Bosman's stories, such as *Mafeking Road*, that they hide the untold pain of African suffering, correlates with the central question and the conclusion to his book (Naipaul 2010: 216-7, 240-1).

The underlying religious-philosophical logic to Naipaul's work is that the tragedy of African pain is an important part of the continent's history. Unless that pain is addressed, South Africa will not be healed to realize its promise as a newly emergent nation. This insight applies to other African countries that have experienced colonialism. Naipaul intuited this insight from his early experience in Trinidad. He went global with it. Religion is also about healing and the creation of peace and community. In the work of decolonization, historical pain is an important resource. Everything depends on how it is used. Naipaul shows the importance of bearing one's pain. This makes his work profoundly religious.

From within the African context, Naipaul's work is timely and relevant. The horizons of knowledge and angles of vision it opens add depth to the more casual tourist view or standard theories on Africa. At times provocative, his latest is cutting edge since it throws a retrospective gaze on the work of earlier travel writers, with their nineteenth-century agendas and interpretations of Africa. Although Naipaul's work does not cover all of Africa, it offers valuable insights into Africa's diverse beliefs, as well as insights into Naipaul's philosophy and

worldview. His book is a warning to those who wish to design fresh adventures into Africa. Good or otherwise intentions do not always turn out as expected in the crucible of life. Amongst its achievements, the book generates a sense of compassion and pathos for the African condition in terms of the treatment of animals, environmental degradation, and denial of human suffering across the continent. Naipaul does not engage in preachy lamentation or escapist nostalgia. The note of pain cannot be missed when he declares, “[T]he people of South Africa had had a big struggle” (Naipaul 2010: 210). However, in reflecting on his visit to the *muti* market in Johannesburg, he expresses a note of disappointment. “I expected a big struggle would have created a bigger people,” he observes, “people whose magical practices might point the way ahead to something profounder” (Naipaul 2010: 210). Some critics might well pause and argue that Naipaul, with his rationalist orientation, has misread the South African situation. Some might be outraged that he wrote, “[I] came to a feeling that its politics and history had conspired to make the people of South Africa simple” (Naipaul 2010: 211). Really? Others might pause to argue that Naipaul is guilty of generalization, to say the least. Nevertheless, what politics and history have made of South Africans is very important. It makes the chapter on South Africa the most interesting in the book. Naipaul has put together a rich cluster of voices whose articulations on South Africa’s non-racial democracy reflect a significant amount of the current mood of disenchantment in the country (Marais 2011; Saul 2001; Russell 2009). South Africa’s role in the promotion of an African Renaissance is called into question if, as Naipaul’s interviewees suggest, there are serious doubts about the results of the country’s “negotiated” transition to democracy. If these doubts are not addressed in good time, the nation’s future is in jeopardy. Serious doubts about the national project can ultimately lead to its disintegration. Much more is needed than the slick political slogans satirized by Naipaul in *The Mystic Masseur*: “GANESH WILL DO WHAT HE CAN, A VOTE FOR GANESH IS A VOTE FOR GOD” or “GANESH IS A MAN OF GOOD AND GOD” (Naipaul 2002: 187). The marriage of religion and politics has had a long history in Africa and the empire. Since they deeply interpenetrate each other, it is impossible to imagine one without the other. Consequently, as Naipaul argues, foreign revealed-religions wreaked such havoc on African belief systems that it became a huge challenge for Africans to create their own social formations that synthesize the “old and new” (Naipaul 2010: 7).

Naipaul’s work makes some important contributions to our understanding of the relationship between religion and the writer. First, writing and religion involve processes of revision. The canon is never closed, but open and fluid. To argue that the canon is closed is hegemonic. It is a strategy designed to make a particular text or body of texts normative, and to argue that all other textual constructions are derivative. For example, in the Western mind, the

religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, were superior to African religions and cultures that did not have written scriptures. During the period of conquest and colonization, the argument was used to claim that the people of the Americas and Africa had no religion. Their colonization was legitimated. The argument probably persists in postcolonial societies to establish boundaries between ethnic groups. In his struggle for authenticity, a writer like Naipaul contests this textual hegemony through his use of two powers: intuition and the capacity to deal with darkness. Since religion is a project of knowing the world to construct a worldview, intuition is vital. The worldview that is constructed in the intuitive process is partial rather than absolute. It is a process rather than a completion. In his 2001 Nobel Prize Lecture, Naipaul made the point when he said, "I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book, intuitively sensed and, in the case of fiction, intuitively worked out, stands on what has gone before, and grows out of it" (Naipaul 2001). By way of emphasis, he repeated, "I said I was an intuitive writer. That was so, and that remains so now, when I am nearly at the end." He introduces the idea of the writer, especially the postcolonial writer, as heretic when he declares, "And I had to do the books I did because there were no books about those subjects to give me what I wanted. I had to clear up my world, elucidate it, for myself" (Naipaul 2001). In addition to intuition, the capacity to deal with darkness or ambiguity is critical. It is directly related to a person's ability to imagine new concepts that lead to freedom, liberation, and authenticity, individually and communally.

Secondly, Naipaul's latest work, though centered on Africa, resonates with his native Caribbean. Although his writings began in a Caribbean setting, Naipaul interrogated the darkness and its hegemonic claims through his project to clear up and elucidate his world for himself. Integral to the concept of "self-elucidation" is the notion "to throw light on" so that in Naipaul's case a new world emerges in which self-alienation is overcome. Writers and artists like Naipaul are needed, especially in nations emerging from colonialism, to create visions of freedom and genuine, self-sustaining models of community.

This argument clears the way to appreciate the religious significance of *The Masque of Africa*, and the relationship between religion and literature, especially their ethical intersections. The writer, as a religious theorist, has a critical role to play in the construction of the ethos of a society. Naipaul's work contains important insights for the renewal of the field of religious studies. These include the role of religion in colonization, social integration, nation building, identity, self-reconstruction, and compassion.

Finally, Naipaul's work shows the relationship between religion and literature in navigating or negotiating darkness. At stake is the intersection between postcolonial literature and the genealogy of a new and emergent religious worldview in which Naipaul's question is foundational: "whether

Africa, left to itself in this matter, might have arrived at its own more valuable synthesis of old and new.” For Naipaul, something specific is always at stake: Caribbean emancipation and integration. But the implications are global since Naipaul’s work is global. We are left to ponder whether Vidia S. Naipaul is way ahead in religious insight into the potential of the world. Certainly, he throws light on what is suppressing this potential. What Naipaul has written remains written. However, the note of reversal he strikes in *The Masque of Africa* casts a retrospective gaze on his past work. In the final analysis, Naipaul and writers in his category help humankind to engage, navigate, and bridge the darkness of worlds that have suffered colonialism and its legacies. They offer significant clues to negotiate the legacies of colonialism such as social fragmentation. Since religion and literature were part of the colonial enterprise, they must be part of the project to rehabilitate societies that have suffered the devastation of colonialism. Through works like Naipaul’s fictional and travel writings we glimpse the significant role that religion plays in social formation in colonial societies and ways in which literature can promote the development of new syntheses for the creation of postcolonial societies.

Notes

1. In comparative terms Ganesh is like St. Peter in Christian mythology, and Legba, the Orisha of the crossroads, in Afro-Caribbean religious traditions such as Vodun, Santeria, and Shango.
2. Member of the British Empire (MBE) is one of the awards given to British citizens and citizens of the British Commonwealth of Nations where they are still allowed for those who have rendered significant work to the empire in various fields of service such as the civil service. It is lower on the hierarchy of awards than the Order of the British Empire (OBE) or knighthood. The award is usually given the reigning British monarch, following recommendation by colonial or postcolonial governments, and announced at the time of the monarch’s official birthday as part of the birthday honors list.
3. Ganesh appears in a number of Naipaul’s other works such as *Miguel Street* (2002: 173-79), and the short story, “My Aunt Gold Teeth,” in *A Flag on the Island* (1969: 9-18).
4. Frantz Fanon was from the Francophone Caribbean and Vidia S. Naipaul from the Anglophone Caribbean.
5. This personal project is central to many classic religious formations in which the struggle of light versus darkness is pivotal to the construction of a religious worldview or order. It was even enshrined on the coat-of-arms of pre-independent, colonial Grenada in the words *Clarior e Tenebris*, brighter out of darkness. In the post-independence era, modern nation-states like Trinidad and Tobago and South Africa focus on unity in diversity, as the new political imaginary. It is also explicit in folk songs, and Reggae lyrics of artists such Jimmy Cliff and Bob Marley.

- 6 It is possible to hear resonances of the theme in other Caribbean writers such as Jean Rhys, C. L. R. James, Earl Lovelace, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Samuel Selvon, and Derek Walcott, to name a few.
- 7 See Theroux (1972: 77-110).
- 8 C. L. R. James was as a mentor to a number of young Caribbean, African and African-American writers. James himself was a novelist, and playwright, short story writer, philosopher, historian, journalist, sportswriter, and political commentator. He is well-known as the author of *The Black Jacobins*, on the Haitian Revolution, and *Beyond the Boundary*, considered to be one of the best treatises on cricket, was also part of his campaign to get Sir Frank Worrell appointed as captain of the West Indies cricket team. For an assessment of C. L. R. James' place in Afro-Caribbean philosophy, see Henry 2000: 47-89.
- 9 On the concept of *axis mundi*, see Eliade (1987: 35-37). Eliade argues that the different beliefs or narratives on the subject of the *axis mundi* express the same profoundly religious feeling: "our world" is holy ground because it is the place nearest to heaven, because from here, from our abode, it is possible to reach heaven; hence our world is a high place" (Eliade 1987: 39). The contemporary notion of South Africa as the "Gateway" to the rest of Africa carry similar sentiments.
- 10 In this regard, Stephen Smith recounts that in 1996, Laurent and Simone Gbagbo's miraculous survival of a car accident resulted in a fearsome God becoming part of their power equation. The Gbagbos, who were Catholics, fervently embraced a born-again Christianity. Under the influence of their evangelical pastor, Moïse Koré, a former telecoms engineer and basketball player who had prophesied Gbagbo's ascent to power, they converted the presidency into a temple on the way to a New Jerusalem. Symbolically, behind Gbagbo's desk in his office, a life-size painting showed him on bended knee in front of a wooden chair with an open Bible. Gbagbo eventually saw himself as chosen by God rather than elected by the people. Consequently, no one, least of all a Muslim from the north like Ouattara, could unseat him. Ouattara is now president. Gbagbo had to be forcibly removed from office after he refused to accept the results of a democratic election won by Ouattara. Attempts to unseat him, including democratic elections, were publicly defined as international conspiracy and privately as a "satanic enterprise" (Smith 2011).
- 11 The expression, "The Wretched of the Earth," is usually associated with Frantz Fanon, from the English translation from the French of his book by the same name. For a comparison of Fanon and Naipaul, see Neill (1982).

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