While watching the Iranian revolution on TV in Connecticut, V. S. Naipaul had the idea of journeying to four Muslim countries—Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia—to write about the new Islam being born there with varying intensities of labour pain.

*Among the Believers* is the result. And, because Naipaul’s is a formidable talent, the book is studded with good things: the surrealist humour (wholly unintentional) with which a young Malaysian fundamentalist explains to Naipaul the solemn differences, in Islam, between mandatory, encourageable, non-encourageable, forbidden and discretionary coughing; the delicately drawn portraits of Behzad, the young communist adrift in the Iran of the mullahs, and of Shafi, who dreams of a Malaysia restored, through Islam, to the waste-free simplicities of village life—but a village life purged of its ‘pagan’, pre-Islamic aspects; the hypocrisy of Pakistan’s arch-fundamentalist Maulana Maudoodi, lifelong opponent of Western materialism, who died in a Boston hospital to which he had gone ‘to look for health . . . to reap where he had not wanted his people to sow’; and above all, a devastating portrait of Khomeini’s hanging judge, Ayatollah Khalkhal, joking and boasting about the killing of the Shah’s prime minister, Hoveyda.

But this is no ordinary travel book: it has theses to expound. The Islamic revival, Naipaul says, is a throwback to medieval times which seeks to create ‘abstract men of the faith, men who would be nothing more than the rules.’ Its ‘act of renunciation’ of the West is a fatal flaw, because it depends on ‘the alien, necessary civilization going on’—Shafi’s ideal village still needs a bus, a road, machinery; and in Indonesia, Naipaul is astonished to find a photocopier in a rural Islamic school. Finally, Naipaul sees communism and Islam as ‘interchangeable revolutions’, both springing from hate and rage: ‘Behzad the communist spoke like Khomeini’, and both.
wished to kill people. These are powerful indictments, and there is much truth in them.

The trouble is that it's a highly selective truth, a novelist's truth masquerading as objective reality. Take Iran: no hint in these pages that in the new Islam there is a good deal more than Khomeneism, or that the mullocracy's hold on the people is actually very fragile. Naipaul never mentions the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, whose leader Rajavi is committed to a 'multi-party democratic system of government'; but the Mujahideen are certainly 'believers'. And what of (or have we forgotten him already?) the Shah of Iran? Naipaul quotes just two criticisms of him: Ayatollah Shariatmadari says, 'The Shah was bad. He had forbidden polygamy and had thereby damaged women.' And the Bombay businessman who attacks the Shah ('He drained the country of billions ... The people of Iran felt they had lost their country') is immediately discredited by the revelation that he was leaving Iran, after his twenty good years under the bad Shah, and going back to Bombay.' Are these really the only Muslims Naipaul could find to speak against the Shah? Did SAVAK get rid of all the rest?

Sins of omission ... Naipaul is so anxious to prove the existence of an Islamic stranglehold on these countries that, in the Pakistan section, there is no discussion of the army at all. And yet the view that Pakistanis have never been a mullah-dominated people, that a military dictator is currently using Islamization as a means of shoring up his unpopular regime, surely deserves a little air time. In my experience of Pakistan, it is not difficult to find people who will talk openly in these terms. Naipaul actually finds one, a jeep-driver in Kaghan who tells him: 'These maulanas are using Islam as a tool ... They want to destroy Pakistan.' This same jeep-driver has previously mentioned that it is now harder to get passports than it was under Mr Bhutto; and Naipaul, refusing to discuss the driver's attack on the theocracy, contents himself with a cheap gibe about the passports: 'Isn't it strange that the only freedom he wants is the freedom to leave the country?' ... attacking the poor fellow for wanting something, a passport,