

February 1, 1991 (Vol. 6, no. 11)

Dear Colleague:

The conquest of Sind (in modern Pakistan) in the eighth century was conducted from Iraq by its Arab governor. His army did not so much seek to spread the Islamic faith there as to plunder and acquire slaves. He triumphed, received much loot, 60,000 slaves, and the head of the king of Sind. Well, you would think that Pakistanis now lament this historical disaster and remember the governor of Iraq with abhorrence. Not so, according to V.S. Naipaul who visited Pakistan in 1979. To the chairman of Pakistan's Commission of Historical and Cultural Research, the hero was the Arab invader rather than the hapless native prince who tried to defend his country, because the invader brought the faith--and that justified everything.

Faith has the power to wipe out history and the pride of heritage. Persia, as everyone knows, had a great past which rivaled the splendor of classical Greece and Rome. "But," Naipaul writes, "you wouldn't have believed it in Iran in 1979; for the Iranians the glory and the truth had begun with the coming of Islam." Pakistan is a new Muslim state. Its land is, however, very old and contains the ruins of the prehistoric (not only pre-Islam, but possibly pre-Hindu) cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. You would think that Pakistanis now view this possession with enormous pride. Not necessarily so--not among the Muslim fundamentalists. Naipaul reports that while he was there in 1979, a letter published in the newspaper urged that the cities be hung "with quotations from the Koran, saying that this was what befell unbelievers." (V. S. Naipaul, "Our Universal Civilization," NYRB, Jan 31, 1991).

Turkey is an Islamic country with three pasts: (1) The immediate past of Ottoman Islamic empire, (2) the more distant ethnic past of the Turks as a people in central Asia who migrated to their present location, and (3) the past of the ancient land of Anatolia with cultural roots reaching back to the Greeks and the Hittites. The Ottoman past, since it permeated modern reality, was not a matter for deliberate choice and cultivation. What the Turks could choose was between an ethnic or nationalist sense of identity going back to their central Asian origins, or a patriotic (land-centered) sense of identity going back to the Greeks and the Hittites. The Turks, under the leadership of Ataturk, opted for patriotism. (Bernard Lewis, History Remembered, Recovered, Invented, 1976).

Best wishes,

*Y. Tu*