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The Novel

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The Agnostic God

Within the first few pages of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, an old Indian man looks eagerly into the eyes of the narrator and states, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." By the time the reader reaches the end of the story, they are left with an insurmountable amount of questions. Why are there multiple stories within one? How does each story pertain to the existence, and belief, of God? And which God is validated by this story? The questions continue to pile on, but the only way they can even begin to be addressed is through the analysis of the multiple religions that Pi practices. These religious practices consist of both Western and Eastern religious philosophies, which Pi believes brings him closer to "God." This example of merging two contrasting concepts together (simply known as duality) is an element that human beings have learned to incorporate and blend into their lives. Through the combination of Western and Eastern religious philosophies in *Life of Pi*, the main character has a story that will "make anyone believe in God" because he does not constrict God into one category; by trying to simply love God, he uncovers the complexity of God's nature through duality.

Pi's first mention of religion begins with the acknowledging thought that humans are born "like Catholics—in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God" (Martel 47). This simple statement reveals the depth in which Pi begins to analyze his religious viewpoints. He states that he is aware of a "Presence" that is not personal, but something that is larger than human beings (48). Based on this deep analysis of himself, he cannot help but begin

to seek God in other religions. Pi's religious journey begins with Hinduism, which makes sense, since he is born in India. Over time, Pi incorporates Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism into his religious practices and beliefs. This is very intriguing because Pi must use duality to create his personal belief system, which consists of both Western and Eastern religious philosophies.

Because of this, it is important to establish and acknowledge the differences between Western and Eastern mindsets, along with the differences between their religious philosophies.

Christianity and Islam are considered to be Western religious philosophies while Hinduism is considered to be an Eastern religious philosophy.

These three religions hold a special place in Pi's spiritual journey—but why? According to author Harold G. Coward, Western religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam “tend to see [human nature perfectibility] to be achieved in the afterlife—and then only with the help of God's grace” (103). Essentially, imperfect human beings can only achieve righteousness with the help of a preeminent and omniscient God that is willing to give it to them. On the other hand, Eastern religious philosophy focuses upon the “perfecting of our human natures as the purpose for which each of us has been created, and as a goal to be realized while we are alive on earth. If we do not succeed in this life, then we will simply be reborn over and over again until we do” (Coward 105). However, Pi manages to draw a connection between each of his faiths; Lord Krishna led him to meet Jesus Christ, and just a year later, “Atman met Allah” (Martel 62), a clear indication that Pi ties both of his Western religions to his first Eastern religion. Pi also clings to different aspects of each religion; he admires the divinity of Lord Krishna, the humanity that Jesus exhibits, and the religious contact that the Islamic prayers give him. This becomes even more evident when Pi admits to his religious leaders, “Bapu Ghandi said, “All religions are

true.” I just want to love God” (69). With these exact details, it slowly becomes clearer that Pi believes that people can perfect their human nature through simply trying to *know* and *love* God.

When Pi’s community discovers that he is practicing three religions, he is forced to identify with just one instead of continuing to embrace all three. This approach to identity is important while considering the development of Pi’s concept of self. Jong S. Jun states that the Western perception of self is based off the virtue of individuals that “follows his or her own natural predisposition in developing his or her talents to perfections” (89). The idea of Western self-perception is, therefore, based solely upon the interest of self-centered individuals. On the other hand, the Eastern viewpoint of self is based upon Confucian influence. This means that the sense of self is based upon certain sets of human relationships, which are the basis of the moral community (92). Ultimately, it is the individual’s duty to maintain relationships among the community—this gives them their sense of self.

These ideas of self-concept are rather conflicting, and these can be tied to their opposite religion; the Western religious philosophy depends solely upon the worshipper to develop a relationship with an almighty God, which is opposite from generalized Western self-concept; at the same time, Eastern religious philosophy tells its followers that it relies heavily on the self to be redeemed, yet their viewpoints depend entirely upon relationship among the community. Pi sense of self-concept does not rely solely on Western or Eastern concepts. He feels a strong sense of community with each of his religious leaders, but at the same time, he seeks God for individual love that he experiences. The individualistic mindset that Pi has, which is so independent from the society he lives in, brings him even closer to God’s infinite wisdom. Pi continues to reach closer to God’s true nature simply because he refuses to restrict him to one single religion.

However, according to Pi, the universe makes more sense to him through the eyes of a Hindu (48). With this statement, Martel manages to incorporate Hindu philosophy along with Western idealism without the reader even realizing it. It seems as though Pi admits that he is “more” of a Hindu than he is a Christian or Muslim, but this is not necessarily true. As Pi describes Hinduism to the narrator, he states that Brahman nirguna is impossible to understand in human terms, such as: “One, Truth, Unity, Absolute, Ultimate Reality, Ground of Being”; when mere humans attempt to describe Brahman, they find that they are not able to; nevertheless, there are qualities within Brahman saguna that humans can comprehend and describe, such as: “loving, merciful, frightening—and we feel the gentle pull of relationship” (48). To realize the perfect oneness with Brahman means that humans enter their truest and most perfect form; it means the humans that reach this are eternally free (Coward 132). According to P.T. Raju, who specializes in the study of Eastern and Western philosophies, there are idealisms in the West that can only be of the “Good, the Beautiful, the True, but not of the evil, the ugly, and the false, maintaining that these are non-being” (215-216). This is the first hint of duality that the reader experiences within this novel; relationships can only be maintained within the realms of Hinduism and of Western idealism through the good qualities of greater beings than that of humans. Even though religions claim to be the only truth, Pi can sense these connections between these Eastern and Western religious philosophies and mindsets. Acknowledging the underlying duality within Hinduism—his very first religion—is Pi’s first step to uncovering the true nature of God.

Nonetheless, the exact God that Pi relentlessly seeks out remains unclear. Pi refuses to constrict his God to one mere category or religion; he chooses to continuously search for one of God through Eastern and Western philosophies. One Western religious philosophy that seems, at

the first place, to be completely bypassed is Judaism, but Martel takes the reader by surprise when he names the ship that Pi sinks on *Tsimtsum*. According to Aryeh Wineman, the definition of *tsimtsum* is as follows: “God’s act of distancing Himself from the world is but a contrived appearance to effect greater love and mutual delight between God and man” (294). Essentially, it is necessary for man to chase after God as he distances himself from the world; by chasing God regardless, they will continue to find God’s love.

Although Pi seems to unintentionally model his personal religious philosophy upon the concept of *tsimtsum*, he simultaneously rejects the notion of the Torah: “The human grasp of the infinite Torah is necessarily limited and dependent upon the measure of our own limited capacity” (296). In Judaism, the Torah is considered the absolute truth, but Pi refuses to accept the fact that he cannot know the entirety of God’s infinite wisdom—and this makes him a dangerous imbalance to nature. God purposefully constricts his infiniteness so that humans can have the finite space to exist, but if one finite soul breathes too closely to God’s infinite wisdom, the universe’s natural reaction is to throw this finite soul into spiritual chaos. By doing this, the balance is restored, and the finite soul is snapped back into its restricted spiritual place. Pi certainly experienced spiritual warfare during his desolate time at sea, and this becomes clear after a few weeks on the ocean, even after he has become accustomed to life at sea:

But it was hard, oh, it was hard. Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love—but sometimes it was so hard to love. Sometimes my heart was sinking so fast with anger, desolation and weariness, I was afraid it would sink to the very bottom of the Pacific and I would not be able to lift it back up (Martel 208-209).

Knowing that Pi does not constrict God to any religion gives this theory even more credit. This is especially true since Pi does not ever truly consider incorporating Judaism into his religious

practices and beliefs; however, his regular practice of multiple religions opens the perfect door for this theory to be incorporated.

Just as there are multiple stories within this story, there are multiple, unending ways to love and experience God. In a deep analysis of the novel's structure of the multiple stories, Seyed Habibi and Sara Karbalaee state,

The paradigmatic, metaphorical axis of structuralism is further perceptible in terms of Pi's religious belief. For Pi, there is no difference among Hinduism, Islam and Christianity and they are metaphorically interchangeable. Pi believes that the differences among these three religions are superficial and those differences are only at the level of rites and rituals . . . and all of these religions teach people how to love God, these three distinct religions are metaphorically substitutional in his scheme of belief (157).

Marilyn Herbert also argues in *The Discussion Companion for Yann Martel's Life of Pi* that Martel structures his entire novel around the number three; there are nine interjections from the narrator (a variable of three), three significant religions, and even Pi's name represents a number that begins with three (41). The writing structure is immensely important to the overall meaning of the religious aspects in this story; the only time that Martel breaks the concept of the number "three" when he incorporates the concept of religion. Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism are dominant, obvious religions within this novel, but Martel insists on incorporating elements that pertain to Judaism. Ultimately, he uses these three religions to draw a connection to the concept of *tsimtsum*. This subtle break from the number three reinforces the idea that there are multiple, unending ways to love God. It also shows, yet again, that God cannot be contained within neat religions; furthermore, this moves on to demonstrate the fact that all of these religions convey the same message: *simply love and know God*. Just as Martel breaks away from the number three, his

novel's main character breaks away from the basic understanding that one religion has all the answers, for they are all synonymous. Overall, Pi begins to realize two ultimate truths: the first, that "God can only exist if Pi accepts and acknowledges his presence" (Herbert 32); and the second, "that Pi, or anyone, can only endure life's hardships with the essence of God's help" (33). As it has been stated before, God and man take a natural delight in the existence of each other, even though they must remain distant in order to exist.

As the reader continues to read the story, the depth of Pi's devotion to God becomes very evident. However, this devotion does not relate to any particular God, but just one infinite one; because of this, it becomes clear why this story is one that will make a person believe in God. Gregory Stephens provides a deeply analytical statement, in which he states,

As a secular writer with sympathies for the religious imagination, Martel can pitch his revisioning of comparative religion to readers who have what Salman Rushdie once called a "God-shaped hole" in their heart. These "implied readers" (Iser) would have a hunger for some of the animating power of faith, if not a capacity for blind commitment to dogmatic faith itself (41).

Martel provided a deeply insightful novel about spirituality, but it is important to note that he never claimed to be a follower of any particular religion. According to Maria Stefanescu, an implied author is one that conceives a new notion through powerful articulation, even if the real author is considerably different from the personality of the novel; because of this, the real author "thus becomes the ultimate repository of work's ethical and aesthetic commitments" (49). By taking this definition into consideration, it can be concluded that "implied readers" are non-religious readers that are influenced to rethink religion after reading this novel. While considering the better story, it is concluded that "with the argument that *Life of Pi* represents a

return to story-telling and to ‘investigating the human’ thus fulfilling, specifically, a key Iserian function of literature: ‘to highlight and explore the deficits left by dominant worldviews and discourses’; (56). Essentially, the reason this story is one to make anyone believe in God is simply because Pi demonstrates a kind of religious philosophy that leans more towards a specific type of spirituality as opposed to religious dogmatism; in all actuality, Pi *rejects* the notion of religious dogmatism when he states that all religions are true. The fact that Pi is willing to give up the confines of religion in order to fully experience God shows the reader that loving God did not come with regulations or rules; these are merely human concepts.

One defining factor that remains consist within the main character of this novel is the fact that Pi never truly lost hope. Even when he feels most desolate and angry, he shouts, “THIS IS GOD’S!” while pointing to the objects surrounding him on the boat. The constant reminder of the God Pi believes in goes hand-in-hand with the statement that Patrick Sherry makes while attempting to answer the question, “Is religion truly a form of life?” He states that religious forms of life include hoping and feeling certain (162); indeed, Pi refuses to ever truly give in to the utter despair that he felt. Even when Pi and Richard Parker are in the middle of the ocean during a lightning storm, Pi begins to rejoice in the complexity of God’s creation; he calls it a vast and fantastic miracle (Martel 233). Soon after Pi rejoices in the power of God, an oil tanker passes them by closely and does not save them. Instead of allowing this to destroy his hope, the main character gazes upon Richard Parker and exclaims,

“I love you!” The words burst out pure and unfettered, infinite. The feeling flooded my chest. “Truly I do. I love you, Richard Parker. If I didn’t have you now, I don’t know what I would do. I don’t think I would make it. No, I wouldn’t. I would die of

hopelessness. Don't give up, Richard Parker, don't give up. I'll get you to land, I promise, I promise" (236)!

Although the concept of hope seems as though it is simple, it is indeed simple to grasp at first; however, it is not so easy to hold on to. The fact that Martel decided to describe Pi's words as "pure, unfettered, and infinite" demonstrates that God's personal love for Pi is also pure and infinite. The hope that Pi never relinquishes brings him even closer to God, even though this God has to allow the universe to separate himself from Pi so that they can both exist separately. During this moment, Pi is the pure description of this God: "All he was aware of was that something stressful and momentous had happened, something beyond the outer limits of his understanding" (236). This is another perfect replication of Pi's entire journey. When *Tsimtsum* sunk, Pi was not aware that he was too close to God, and that he could not become any closer, or else they could not exist separately; instead, all Pi knew was that something stressful, tragic, and awful had occurred outside of his ability to truly understand why it happened. However, Pi is continuously redeemed in the hope that he finds in his infinite God, and this storm, along with Richard Parker's reaction, serves as a perfect illustration of God's truest nature.

Overall, people everywhere of all faiths and beliefs has the potential to learn and consider an immense amount of information after reading this book, whether those beliefs rests in atheism, agnosticism, Eastern beliefs, Western beliefs, or in duality itself. The reader's questions may remain unanswered, but Pi's unwavering faith in spirituality and God himself—not the religions necessarily, but just the Presence—allows him to experience a love so greater than any human can express or conceive of. The truest form of God does not rely upon the "ultimate truths" in one religion, but rather, the blending of duality and what the readers find in themselves. Yann Martel demonstrates true love, perseverance, and pure spirituality within his

novel, *Life of Pi*, and this is coming from myself; I was once an atheist, but after reading this book, I can sense that spirituality is real while religion may not be necessarily truthful. *Life of Pi* is a truly life-changing, inspirational story, and it is certainly a work that everyone should experience firsthand.

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