Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and "the Better Story" in Life of Pi

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Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* is an allegorical castaway story about a sixteen-year-old Indian polytheist who survives 227 days on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. Martel frames this postmodern variant on the Noah’s ark tale as “a story that will make you believe in God” (viii). But these words are neither Martel’s, nor those of the semifictional “Martel-like” narrator one encounters in the “Author’s Note” (Innes 25). Rather, they are voiced by Mr. Adirubasamy, an elderly Indian man whom the Canadian quasi-author meets at a coffee house in Pondicherry. The virtual author, like the real Martel, is the author of two failed books, and looking for a capital-S “Story.” Yet after tracking down the primary narrator of the novel (Pi Patel) in Toronto, reading his diaries of his Pacific Ocean ordeal, and listening to taped interviews with Pi, the quasi-author agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that “this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God” (x).

That apparently “evangelical premise” could awaken resistance among readers who take this “explicit but deceptive statement” too literally (Ishmael). As one reviewer notes, “Martel’s statement is likely to have the opposite effect on his reader, provoking a determined counter-reaction not to succumb to a didactic religious agenda.” Although the novel has its didactic moments, most reviewers seem to have taken a measured view of the author’s “religious agenda.” In interviews, Martel notes that he comes from a secular background in Quebec. There are no indications that writing this book represented a Damascus conversion experience for him. *Life of Pi* is not a conversion narrative per se, but it is in part an ascent narrative (a journey toward enlightenment) that also contains elements of descent narratives. 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.

Reviewing *Life of Pi* for the *Nation*, Charlotte Innes describes it as “a religious book that makes sense to a nonreligious person” (25). In similar fashion, the *Pequod* argues that Martel’s book “achieves something more quietly spectacular” than a literal conversion, or a restoring of one's faith in God: “it makes the reader want to believe in God. Martel gives the reader the democratic choice: the desire to believe rather than the belief itself” (Ishmael).

Those responses of the secular left contrast sharply with the responses of my first-year students at the University of the West Indies, to whom I have twice taught *Life of Pi*. For students from a fundamentalist background, it is a challenge to buy into a nar-
rative that proclaims a God that transcends the imaginations of most believers in the three faiths in which the young Pi has been trained (Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam). In analyzing the theme of finding God, I position the text at a midway point between two different kinds of reception: secular readers for whom the notion of religious belief is at best metaphorical, and religious readers who may resist the narrative’s conceit that the true God exists outside the confines of institutional religion.

*Life of Pi* is suffused by a pervasive liminality. The teenaged Pi is in motion between continents, between faiths, and between childhood and adulthood, which means that the novel is also a *bildungsroman.* I here focus above all on the text’s and Pi’s location in the contested space between believers and nonbelievers, and on the novel’s attempted mediation between those seeming binary opposites. I ask two perhaps paradoxical questions: In what ways would this be seen by the nonreligious as a religious book with appeal? Put differently, to what degree and in what ways might this text actually give secular readers a desire to believe, even if it does not change their resistance to the trappings of faith itself? Second, in what ways might this text lead religious readers who already believe in God to reenvision that deity, or to worship him, her, or it in a new way?

One of the research questions my students pursued, and a baseline of my own research, was: How does Pi’s religious training prepare him for his ordeal at sea? I have developed three interconnected approaches to the question of how both religious and nonreligious readers might see God or religion with new eyes through the process of engaging *Life of Pi.* These three approaches to the new vision of God that this fiction is said to be capable of inspiring are:

1. revisioning God by rethinking human-animal relations
2. the balance of science and religion as a necessary part of believing in God
3. the privileging of a good story over either religion or science

A brief summary of what each of these approaches entails is as follows:

1. Pi gets a new vision of God, and a new faith, precisely by having to worship outside of institutional contexts during the process of trying to stay alive for 227 days on a lifeboat also inhabited by a Bengal tiger. I argue that Pi comes to see God in a new way by becoming not only a companion but a servant to the tiger named Richard Parker.

2. Pi’s belief in God is framed within the context of having to balance science and religion. Through this balance Pi not only survives his close encounter with the tiger, but also makes sense of his postmodern journey between nations and faiths.

3. Martel’s “better story” trumps either science or religion. The better story is itself an object of adoration, a primary means through which one achieves or glimpses faith. Martel notes, “The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines. Life is a story. You can choose your story. And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story.” The religious imagination is often for Martel the best overlay: it entertains us as it ethically guides individual and collective transitions or rites of passage—whether or not we literally believe in a given religious story. These stories are often more appealing than...
the “dry, yeastless factuality” of science (Martel, Life 336). Thus, “believing in God” in some sense is a willingness to suspend disbelief while we listen to fantastic stories, inevitably informed by religion, about a world in which truth is stranger than fiction. As various voices in Life of Pi remind us, the better story is the one that includes animals. So an essential component of a story that makes us believe in God is that it decenters human beings. In contrast to commercial culture’s image of humans as closer to machines than to mammals, this better story puts animals back at the center of our secular and religious imaginations.

From the first page on, Martel’s story challenges the notion that a firm line can be drawn between fantasy and reality (fiction and objective facts). This boundary fudging also clearly applies to the supposed incompatibility of science and religion. So belief in God is clearly not an aspiration imagined by Martel as confined to the province of fundamentalists. Right off the bat, the “better story” that will awaken belief is presented as the cure to a secular dilemma, to a moment of doubt in artistic faith: to the fictional author’s “soul-destroying discovery” that “your story is emotionally dead” (vii).

So we are immediately cued that stories have a redemptive potential. The better story functions much like redemption songs, giving meaning to suffering and providing hope in seemingly hopeless circumstances. Without a better story, Pi imagines that even on the deathbed the “dry, yeastless factuality” of the agnostic will leave the “reasonable self” lacking imagination. On the threshold of death, the doubter “might try to explain the warm light bathing him” in this way: “Possibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain.” This lack of literary imagination is what causes the agnostic to “miss the better story” (70).

But Pi’s story is also full of nonbelievers and indeed Marxist atheists whom Pi considers to be his “brothers and sisters of a different faith” (31). They believed in their disbelief. Pi’s biology teacher, Mr. Kumar, is fond of visiting the Pondicherry Zoo, managed by Pi’s father. Mr. Kumar describes the zoo as his “temple,” yet “puzzles” Pi by telling him: “Religion is darkness” (29). Yet Pi clearly recognizes that the Marxism of Mr. Kumar, “the first avowed atheist I ever met” (28), is a faith that demands a certain respect. One day at the zoo, Mr. Kumar tells Pi about having suffered from polio when he was Pi’s age and asking himself over and over, “Where is God?” He came to the conclusion that it was medicine, and not God, that came to save him. He sees Marxism as a form of quasi-messianic medicine that will heal what ails the human race: “One day we will take hold of the means of production and there will be justice on earth” (30).

This may come from the mouth of a godless Marxist, but it is really another expression of blind faith, like St. Paul writing, “I walk by faith, and not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7, Revised Standard Version [hereafter RSV]); or “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 RSV). Kumar’s faith is in a millennial change, a sort of secular judgment day. Pi remarks that “The tone was right—loving and brave—but the details seemed bleak” (30). This was not “the better story.” Yet they were words with power, and the young Pi instinctively fears their power—that the words might have “the effect of polio on me. What a terrible disease
that must be if it could kill God in a man” (31). And that “disease” clearly also means
the sort of rationality that believes that “scientific knowledge will expose religion as su-
perstitious bosh” (30).

Yet Mr. Kumar is Pi’s favorite teacher and the reason that he goes on to study zool-
ogy, the science that constitutes half his worldview. The other half is religion; hence, he
also goes on to get a degree in theology. This dual training in science and religion is an-
nounced on the very first page of Pi’s narrative. So clearly we should not expect that the
belief in God that this “finely spun yarn” is supposed to be capable of inspiring would
be anything like what a zealous monotheist or a fundamentalist of any stripe might
hope for. For this teenager with the “strange religious practices” (3) does indeed find a
new vision of God while a castaway at sea.

The problem for readers accustomed to thinking of religions and faiths in the sin-
gular—you can only serve one master—is that Pi, as a teenager in India, sought out and
received training in three faiths: Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. He took seriously
Gandhi’s injunction that “all religions are true” (76). Pi confounded religious authori-
ties by declaring an equal opportunity faith—“I just want to love God” (76). He moves
beyond the farcical “introduction to interfaith dialogue” (77) and truly comes to un-
derstand what it means to believe in the “one God” (162)—and to love that God in all
his or her manifestations—only during his ordeal at sea.

Pi had to be away from other human beings and away from institutional religions
that claim ownership of God in order to sight the unity of that God, and to be a “suf-
fering servant” of that God, as true love requires (Isaiah 53:3–7 RSV). But to frame this
ascent narrative just as an emerging vision of God that draws on three religious faiths
which sustain the castaway during his ordeal at sea would be, while accurate as far as it
goes, unfaithful to the novel’s “better story.”

Religion in this text is not presented as inherently superior, but religious stories pro-
vide a framework that makes experience comprehensible for many, or provides moral
guidelines. Therefore, religious teachings can be considered as “myths to live by”
(Campbell) or “metaphors to live by” (Lakoff and Johnson). As a survival narrative
(Duncan), Life of Pi demonstrates that the stories constructed out of trauma “are the
provisions we need to go on living” (Georgis 166). Their spiritual components can co-
exist alongside of, and indeed complement, the stories of science, which also have their
narrative appeal, but which are insufficient food for the human imagination, especially
in conditions of extreme duress.

Human-Animal Relations

Pi’s training as a scientist, and thus his nonreligious preparation to revision human-
animal relations, began at his father’s zoo in Pondicherry. For Pi, the zoo was “paradise
on earth” (15). But Mr. Patel, a thoroughly secular man, used his job as zookeeper to in-
struct his children in the true nature of humans and animals, and their often unnatu-
ral relationship.
As the son of a zookeeper, Pi witnessed the routine cruelty to animals that would lead him, as an adult, to observe of human beings: “our species’ excessive predatoriness has made the entire planet our prey” (31). Pi’s father attempted to call attention to this imbalance. One method was on display for all visitors at the Pondicherry Zoo: “Just beyond the ticket booth Father had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain [. . .]. Behind it was a mirror” (34). Humans were not only capable of extraordinary cruelty, but even in loving animals, they revealed their self-absorption, Pi concluded. Most people were incapable of seeing animals as they were. Whether we saw them as “devoted” and “loving,” or “vicious” and “bloodthirsty,” the end result was the same: “In both cases we look at an animal and see a mirror” (34).

Pi’s father chose a Bengal tiger named Mahisha, a “hulking beast of 550 pounds” (36), to teach his sons how to look beyond the mirror. “Tigers are very dangerous,” he shouted one day, and then stressed the rationale of the demonstration that was coming: “I’m going to show you how dangerous tigers are. I want you to remember this lesson for the rest of your lives” (37). After starving Mahisha for three days, Mr. Patel put a goat in the tiger’s cage. The predictable, bloody result “was enough to scare the living vegetarian daylights out of me,” recalled Pi (39).

Part 1 of *Life of Pi* moves between Pi’s childhood memories and the author-narrator’s interludes in which he observes the adult Pi at home in Toronto, where he lives surrounded by children, pets, and the icons of the three faiths that have shaped him. Near the end of part 1, Pi recounts the circumstances that led to his family’s attempted transmigration and to his own life-changing ordeal at sea. When Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi began jailing political opponents, Pi’s father decided to relocate the family to Canada. They sold most of their animals to various zoos around the world. Then on June 21, 1977, the family and the remaining (sedated) animals departed Madras on the *Tsimtsum*, a Panamanian-registered Japanese cargo ship.

Part 1 is backstory and prequel to part 2 (“The Pacific Ocean”), the heart of the novel at over two hundred pages. Here Pi will see in the ocean a different sort of mirror, which reveals a very different image of animals and his relationship to them. This section opens immediately after the *Tsimtsum* has sunk, and begins with Pi yelling encouragement to Richard Parker as the Bengal tiger swims toward the lifeboat where Pi sits. Pi has lost his entire family, as well as his “extended family” of “birds, beasts and reptiles.” “Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed,” he realizes, and asks, “And I am allowed no explanation?” (108).

Pi addresses these words to Richard Parker, who in the context of tragedy becomes the embodiment of Pi’s hope. As the tiger swims toward the lifeboat, Pi’s familial feelings toward Richard Parker suddenly clash with the realization of the implications of the lessons learned from his father about the supreme danger that tigers represent: “In a few seconds you’ll be aboard and we’ll be together. Wait a second. Together? We’ll be together? Have I gone mad?” (109).

Richard Parker is the agent of the explanation that Pi will receive to his questions:
“And I am allowed no explanation?”; “I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven?” (108); and “Have I gone mad?” The account from heaven will be an extensive teaching about just what is involved in treating a tiger as one's shipmate and family. But the human-animal togetherness Pi comes to imagine and practice is not on the order of Isaiah's millennial vision of when "the leopard shall lie down with the kid" (Isaiah 11:6 RSV). Something more prosaic, if possibly equally transformative, is at work. Pi's transition into a concept of companionship with, and indeed love for, this tiger, requires a rethinking of the relativity of madness and sanity. What is madness on land may turn out to be sane on the sea as a castaway, when one is removed from all human companionship.

The relationship Pi develops with a tiger should be understood within the context of the invention of companions in other castaway narratives. In Castaway (2000), while stranded on a tropical island, Tom Hanks begins talking to a soccer ball that he names Wilson (Zemeckis). In the postapocalyptic world of I Am Legend (2007), Will Smith engages in dialogue with mannequins (Lawrence). These films are informed by a longer history of castaway narratives (Weaver-Hightower), whose fictional template is Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel Robinson Crusoe. In these narratives, something is always lost of one's humanity, but a new dimension of humanness is also gained. The thing gained (new vision) is intimately connected to the loos(en)ing of the imagination, a setting adrift of the moorings of reason that only happens to the castaway because s/he is cut off from humanity, or known human community. This facilitates, or necessitates, a reimagining of kinship and community. In Pi's case, the imaginary conversations and the revisioning of kinship and community take place primarily with animals.

In the beginning of his castaway experience, Pi fed Richard Parker so that the tiger would not feed on him. But in keeping the tiger alive, he found a way to keep faith alive. He found a reason to go on living. He found companionship. Pi never lost the fear of tigers that his father had instilled in him, but he soon came to understand that feeding the tiger had importance for him far beyond the literal self-interest of physical survival.

Most humans assume that animals exist to serve us. If we cannot fully master them, then we confine animals within controlled spaces to give us the illusion of control: zoos or wildlife preserves. In Life of Pi, Richard Parker and Pi are "swept back to within a time before the war against animals was won" (Cloete 325). Where the tiger's movements cannot be strictly controlled, the tiger is superior. Pi immediately understands this. During his first few days on the lifeboat, he lives in a constant state of terror, convinced that at any moment the tiger will devour him. Fortunately for Pi, Richard Parker exhibits "passivity [...] for three long days" (151)—probably recovering from sedation. Then he finds other sources of meat: a zebra and a hyena.

Soon the nonhuman meat is consumed and inter-species communication begins: “when Richard Parker's amber eyes met mine, the stare [...] spoke of self-possession on the point of exploding with rage. [...] Every hair on me was standing up, shrieking with fear” (168). With irrational thinking driven by paralyzing fear, Pi schemes: “I held on to one thought: Richard Parker. I hatched several plans to get rid of him so that the
lifeboat might be mine” (174). The possibility of possession of the lifeboat, or control of the tiger, is soon jettisoned. One of his plans, “Number Six: Wage a War of Attrition” (175), is quickly recognized as a delusion: “I tell you, if you wage a war of attrition, you will lose it! You will die!” (178).

Abject fear annihilates both body and reason. For Pi, the way to master fear is at once literary and spiritual: “You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it” (179). It is at this point that “Richard Parker [. . .] calmed me down.” Giving up the illusion of dominance, or victory, Pi allowed Richard Parker to order and give new meaning to his existence: “It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness” (179).

This purpose is attained when Pi implements “Plan Number Seven: Keep Him Alive” (183). And thus Pi becomes a servant. He does not ignore the challenge of physical survival, but the biological imperative becomes infused with a divine imperative. To be sure, Pi exercises elements of control and even limited domination. He employs his scientific training: splashing urine to mark territory (191). But at every moment of his ordeal, Pi is forced to decenter himself in relation to the forces of the natural world, which includes but is not limited to the tiger. He is forced to rethink the boundary between animals and humans. This is illustrated in a story that reveals the implications of the tiger’s human-assigned name.

After describing a “state of delirium” brought on by life-threatening thirst and fear of the tiger, Pi recounts the story of how Richard Parker came to the Pondicherry Zoo. As for his unusual moniker, he was “so named because of a clerical error” (146). A hunter for the Forest Department had shot a tiger with immobilizing darts because she was “so close to human habitation she might pose a threat to the villagers” (147). This hunter, Richard Parker, shipped the tiger and her cub to the Pondicherry Zoo, but a clerk was confused and gave the cub the name of the hunter (147). This theme of when animals get too close for comfort for humans is examined from several angles in Life of Pi. Yet this naming story also points to the interpenetration of animals and humans. Wild animals keep encroaching on human dominions; when seen from the animal’s perspective, humans keep taking over animal habitats. In the process, the firm division between civilization and wildness, humans and animals, sometimes gets fudged.

The psychological penetration of humans by animals is evident from the beginning of the novel. In the first chapter, Pi confesses, “Richard Parker has stayed with me. [. . .] I still see him in my dreams. They are [. . .] nightmares tinged with love” (7). Later, we read, “After all these years, Richard Parker still preys on his mind” (46). This language points to the novel’s revisioning of human-animal relations. The animal that could have preyed on Pi’s body instead preys on his mind and his soul. But this is not the anthropomorphizing we have been warned against early on: hence love and the terror of a nightmare remain mixed. The reason for the haunting is revealed toward the end of the novel when the lifeboat finally runs aground on Mexico’s Pacific shore, and Richard Parker runs off into the jungle without so much as a backward glance. “What a terrible
thing it is to botch a farewell,” Pi reflects, still remorseful or melancholy years later. “It’s important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go. Otherwise [... ] your heart is heavy with remorse” (316–17). Pi’s story, on one level, is a processing of his remorse for the loss of a companion who shared, and in a real sense shaped, a transformative experience.

In retrospect, Pi understands that his “will to live” survived only “thanks to Richard Parker. [...] Without Richard Parker I would not be alive to tell you my story” (182). But this radical decentering of the human story and sense of self-importance coexisted with the realization, during the crisis, that “I had to tame him” (181). This process of partially taming and feeding the tiger became a discipline for taming his ego, and thus serving God.

How did Pi stay alive? After a passage in which he compares himself to other castaways (their ordeals were brief compared to his “trial” of 227 days, he notes), Pi describes his daily process of keeping himself busy as “one key to my survival” (210). One notes that prayer, and the sustenance of Richard Parker, dominate his daily activities. He prays at five different times during the course of a day. But at least ten of the activities he lists are related to keeping his “master” alive: fishing, the preparing of fish, the securing of water, and so on (210–11).

*Life of Pi* takes us back to the Garden (the sea) and inverts human-animal relations. Man becomes a servant of animal, and thus comes to believe he is serving God. Pi, and by extension Martel, found traditional language inadequate to tell “the better story” of what he got from his interactions with animals. A combination of religious metaphors and science was required.\footnote{12}

**Science and Religion**

Pi begins his narrative by noting that he received a double bachelor’s in religious studies and zoology from the University of Toronto. This doubling\footnote{13} of science and religion is a leitmotif in the novel, as with the two Mr. Kumars who point Pi down parallel paths: “Mr. and Mr. Kumar taught me biology and Islam. Mr. and Mr. Kumar led me to study zoology and religious studies at the University of Toronto. Mr. and Mr. Kumar were the prophets of my Indian youth” (68).

Early on, Pi calls attention not only to the inspiration he has received from religion and science, but to the blind spots, and indeed the foolishness, that one sometimes encounters in each. “I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion,” Pi remarks (16). The nonsense is the human projection that animals in the wild are “happy” because they are “free.” Pi is always at pains to maintain a comparative perspective on science and religion: “I know zoos are no longer in people’s good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both” (21). This is one indication among many that the novel interrogates the notion of freedom, but is also a critique of speciesism in both science and religion (Wolfe, *Animal Rites*; LaFollette and Shanks). As Pi observes regarding human preconceptions about animals and the supposedly free life in the “wild,” “What is the meaning of free-
dom in such a context?" (17).

Pi seems to find science and religion equally guilty of anthropomorphism: "The obsession with putting ourselves at the center of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists" (34). So Pi's narrative is a radical decentering of human-centered storytelling, which draws on the stories and the teachings of science and religion.

As the sole human survivor after the ship Tsimtsum sinks, Pi's first impulse is to fall back on his religious imagination. When he first sees Richard Parker swimming toward him, he uses the language of all three religions in which he has been trained: "Jesus, Mary, Muhammad and Vishnu, how good to see you" (107). Upon realizing the danger the tiger represents, he again falls back on religious language: "Vishnu preserve me, Allah protect me, Christ save me" (108).

But the crisis of coexisting on a lifeboat with the Bengal tiger soon requires Pi to shift into scientific thinking. Like a zookeeper or circus trainer might, Pi uses a whistle to instill fear or a sense of limits in the superior animal. Pi knows enough about animal psychology and physiology to see quickly that Richard Parker gets seasick easily. He concocts a plan to combine the whistle with rocking the boat so that, like Pavlov's dogs, Richard Parker learns to associate the whistle with an unpleasant motion. Thus the whistle, combined with human knowledge and ingenuity, becomes an instrument of discipline. In this sense, Pi is still a master.

But Martel's better story seeks to redefine master and mastery. Mastering the arts of survival includes the imperative, for Pi, of learning to master his emotions. And he masters his fear by learning to serve an animal master. This process—the achieving of animal-human equilibrium, and a science-religion balance—is achieved through an attention to detail that has both scientific and religious components. His prayer practice clearly plays a role in helping Pi achieve a sort of Zen-like attention to being in the moment that enables him to go on with the science-informed rituals (cleaning, fishing, etc.) that are necessary for survival. Together, these two practices form the cornerstones of Pi's service to Richard Parker.

Names are a crucial means by which Martel suggests an interrelationship between science and religion. This begins with the title character: Pi is short for his birth name, Piscine, which caused him embarrassment because his classmates pronounced it as "pissing" and made jokes at his expense. "Pi" was originally a means of being saved from the torture of his classmates. He seems to have gotten them to go along with the abbreviation because he wrote the whole thing out on the chalkboard, giving them a symbol and a mathematical formula: 3.14. "And so, in the Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge," Pi recalls (26–27).

There is irony in the refuge that Pi found. The Pequod reviewer notes that "Pi is an irritating and unique number for the mathematician who, above all other academics, desires certainty and factuality." It irritates because it defies the scientist's longing for certainty. At the same time it fascinates because of its "infinite randomness" (Ishmael). Pi,
as a mathematical formula, functions both as a logical equation and as a sort of mystical symbol. The novel itself seeks to strike that same sort of “irritating but fascinating” balance of the title character’s name.

The interconnection of science and religion is also evident in the name of the ship from which Pi was cast away. The Tsimtsum presumably sank because it was insufficiently scientific. The Japanese investigators in part 3 are frustrated because Pi cannot give them a rational explanation for why it sank. The ship’s name is actually a theory of the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, Pi’s religious specialty in college. (His scientific focus, the three-toed sloth, “reminded [him] of God” because of its miraculous capacity to survive [5]). Luria was a Cabalist who believed that life’s secrets lay in numbers. “Luria believed that God’s light contracted from the center of the universe, purging itself of evil elements, leaving an empty space (a circle) in which human life developed,” Charlotte Innes writes, “But God also sent down a ray of light (like a radius) so that the few remaining divine sparks could reconnect with Him” (28). The original divine contraction is referred to as tzimtzum or simsum. This is deeply symbolic in the context of the novel: Pi experiences his own void, of withdrawal of God, which he (partially) finesses by clinging to a radically deconstructed religious practice.

Pi’s “better story” is not just about believing in God, but reconciling the prophets of science and religion. It is also, in a broader sense, a meditation on the problematical nature of believability itself. In part 3, Pi’s dialogue with the Japanese investigators defamiliarizes the notion that “believable” is in fact an objective quality. The Japanese tell Pi repeatedly that they disbelieve his story. “We believe what we see,” they state, clearly believing in the superiority of an “objective,” scientific perspective. “No scientist would believe you,” they insist (326–27). But Pi points out that scientists are hardly always objective: in their time they dismissed visionaries like Copernicus and Darwin. The bonsai trees Mr. Chiba describes—“three-hundred-year-old trees that are two feet tall”—are “botanically impossible,” Pi says. “I believe what I see,” he retorts, turning the tables (327). When the Japanese continue insisting on their “difficulty believing” Pi’s “incredible story”—particularly Pi’s cohabitation with a tiger—Pi’s exasperation with literalism explodes: “Don’t you bully me with your politeness! Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?” (330).

When the Japanese implore him to be reasonable, Pi responds that reason is excellent for practical matters such as getting food and “keeping tigers away,” but those who are “excessively reasonable [. . .] risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater” (331). In other words, the heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing. Those who insist on the scientific method at the expense of narrative blind themselves to a cornerstone of human nature: the need to tell stories.

But the Japanese rationalists go on insisting that certain parts of Pi’s story are “extremely hard to believe” (332). They ask for the true version of “what really happened” (335). They are also, Pi declares, blinded by “dry, yeastless factuality” (336). They are incapable of understanding the difference between “another story,” which Pi offers and de-
livers, and “what really happened.” Thus, part 3, in which the Japanese investigators play the straight men, allows Martel to let Pi voice a central question of the novel: “Doesn’t the telling of something always become a story?” And, “Isn’t telling about something [. . .] already something of an invention? Isn’t just looking upon this world already something of an invention?” (335).

The inability to distinguish when objective description in this narrative leaves off, and when poetic or religious invention begins, may also trip up some readers’ expectations about believability. But fiction, like religion, always uses metaphorical language to describe a reality that is often stranger than fiction. Neither the story of Noah and the ark, nor Pi on the lifeboat with a tiger, can be considered objectively true, in all of their details. But both are metaphors that make comprehensible the passes-all-understanding phenomenon of human survival in extreme circumstances. Or as the Japanese investigators finally acknowledge in the summary report with which the novel concludes, Pi’s is “an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances” (354). In the final analysis, they give up the quixotic quest for objectivity or believability, and adapt a literary framework, acknowledging that Pi’s “story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks” (354), just as one might say that Noah’s story is unparalleled in the history of floods.

**The Better Stories of Religion in the Ordeal at Sea**

Pi’s understanding of “God” is fundamentally altered by having to live so perilously close to the overwhelming forces of nature—including the sea and the tiger. His understanding of nature is likewise inevitably shaped by his practice of three religions. Over and over, he references and revises the religious stories with which he is familiar to make sense of events that surpass his rational understanding during his ordeal at sea. But at times, the ordeal is so traumatic as to challenge and to cast into doubt the legitimacy of his religious training.

I want to frame my analysis of Pi’s moment of doubt in faith by revisiting the context of one of the “better stories” of the Bible about faith being reimagined in exile. I refer to Psalm 137, popularized in reggae and other musical forms as “By the Rivers of Babylon.”

The context of the psalm is that the Jews were in exile—in a state of political and religious subjugation. On the banks of the Tigris River, they had to think about their deity in new ways. They could no longer worship Jehovah in the temple in Jerusalem, where it had been natural to think of their God as a tribal deity. But looking westward from present-day Iraq, the Jews begin thinking about their deity more explicitly as an international God. This theme emerges in later Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah’s reference to God building “a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7 RSV). It seems unlikely that such a broad conception of religious practice would have emerged without having been marooned from the Jewish homeland.

Pi goes through a similar experience on the Pacific Ocean, which defamiliarizes his
prior understandings of God. He has to adapt his religious rituals to circumstances: “solitary Masses without priests or consecrated Communion hosts [. . .] acts of devotion to Allah not knowing where Mecca was and getting my Arabic wrong” (231).

Without the normative accoutrements and orienting horizons, Pi finds “comfort” in his truncated rituals, but still cannot avoid doubt. “But it was hard, oh, it was hard [. . .] sometimes it was so hard to love” (231). He felt his heart “sinking so fast with anger, desolation, and weariness,” and at such moments, he would improvise a “new song,” a liturgy of faith-under-pressure: pointing to Richard Parker, he would say aloud, “THIS IS GOD’S CAT!”

I would point to the lifeboat and say aloud, “THIS IS GOD’S ARK!” [. . .] I would point at the sky and say aloud, “THIS IS GOD’S EAR!”
And in this way I would remind myself of creation and my place in it. But [. . .] God’s cat was a constant danger. God’s ark was a jail.

[. . .] God’s ear didn’t seem to be listening. (232)

In fact, he admits, his despair was sometimes “a heavy blackness that let no light in or out”—a nihilistic “hell beyond expression” that was much closer to a scientific black hole than to Luria’s “divine sparks.” But the moment “always passed,” often simply because of the urgent tasks that “cried out” for his attention: schools of fish to be netted, and knots to be reknotted (232).

One night he awoke to a vision of the firmament in all its glory, like the “King of glory” of whose earth, the Psalmist says, “he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters” (Psalm 24:2 RSV). On land, faith has the power to move mountains. But as a castaway, faith is humbled and made finite; one is forced to come to terms with a Creator whose creation constantly reinforces our fragility and insignificance.

So when Pi meditates on “creation and my place in it,” his place is ever more de-centered. Looking at the multitude of stars above him and the vastness of the sea around him, Pi “felt like the sage Markandeya, who fell out of Vishnu’s mouth while Vishnu was sleeping and so beheld the entire universe” (196). His conclusion reinforces the importance of mastering his ego and his attachment to his suffering as a form of spiritual maturity: “I saw my suffering for what it was, finite and insignificant, and I was still” (196).

Religious stories also provide guidance to Pi during virtually all of his encounters with animals. In one episode, a school of flying fish launches over the lifeboat. Their fins cut Pi’s flesh, and he calls upon the Christian tradition to make sense of his suffering. “Standing unprotected as I was, I felt I was living the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Every fish that hit me was like an arrow entering my flesh” (201). But his understanding of that legend is transfigured by watching how Richard Parker fights off the flying fish: “Such a mix of ease and concentration, such a being-in-the-present, would be the envy of the highest yogis” (201).
But the highest yogis would never kill an animal. Pi faces a moral dilemma because of a biological imperative: he must kill to survive. As indicated, Pi must feed Richard Parker or have the tiger feed on him. But killing animals is against his religion—Hinduism, at least. At one point he hauls a dorado on board and then feels all but incapable of killing a living creature in order to use it as food, primarily for Richard Parker, but also for himself. “A lifetime of peaceful vegetarianism stood between me and the willful beheading of a fish,” he recalls (202).

Although Pi learns to kill in order to live, this also seems to reinforce the value of religious teaching for him: “All sentient life is sacred. I never forget to include this fish in my prayers” (203). In this sense, Pi prays in a manner similar to Native Americans who offered thanks to buffalo or deer who “offered” their life so that human life could continue. Pi absolves himself of responsibility for killing that dorado by imagining the fish to be an incarnation of God—hence, the God who sacrifices himself to ensure human survival. “Thank you, Lord Vishnu. [. . .] Once you saved the world by taking the form of a fish. Now you have saved me by taking the form of a fish” (204–5). This seems to be evidence that Pi is developing his own form of religious syncretism by fusing Hinduism with Christianity, in which the God comes to earth and sacrifices himself for human beings.

Hinduism in this novel is given a position of first among equals. “The universe makes sense to me through Hindu eyes,” Pi says early on. “First wonder goes deepest; wonder after that fits in the impression made by the first. I owe to Hinduism the original landscape of my religious imagination” (53, 55). The “first wonder” of the “original landscape” is bound up with the concept of “Brahman, the world soul, the sustaining frame upon which is woven, warp and weft, the cloth of being” (53). This is, in essence, “no different from atman, the spiritual force within us, what you might call the soul,” Pi notes, perhaps nodding to an implied Christian reader (53).

Pi is initially skeptical about Christianity: the religion “had a reputation for few gods and great violence” (56). At age fourteen, when he enters a Catholic church while on family vacation in Munnar, his first impressions are “Something about a human sacrifice. An angry god who had to be appeased with blood” (58). But a Father Martin tells Pi “a story” about God’s son paying the price for humanity’s sins. Pi notes that he was at first drawn to this story because of “disbelief [. . .] I’d never heard of a Hindu god dying” (58–59).

Through a Hindu lens, to limit God to one son seemed “divine stinginess” (62). Some of the stories were counterintuitive to him, such as the “petulant” act of Jesus cursing a fig tree. The mystery of this “greater love” (gods who sacrifice themselves for humans) which is the cornerstone of the Christian story “bothered” Pi. But still, “I couldn’t get Him out of my head. Still can’t. [. . .] The more He bothered me, the less I could forget Him. And the more I learned about Him, the less I wanted to leave Him” (62–63).

But Pi’s manner of assimilating “the Greatest Story Ever Told” (“Christians are so fond of capital letters,” Pi notes [58]) is typically syncretic. After Father Martin inspires
in Pi a vision of spiritual joy, the teenager rushes down one hill (where the Christian god reigned) and up another (ruled over by Hindu deities) in order “to offer thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way” (64).

Pi seems more immediately receptive to Mr. Kumar’s teachings about Islam as being centered on “the Beloved.” Says Pi, “It is a beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion.” Its rituals immediately feel natural to him. “It felt good to bring my forehead to the ground. Immediately it felt like a deep religious contact” (67). The experience was of applying the concept of the Beloved to all creation: “Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity. [. . .] Every element lived in harmonious relation with its neighbour, and all was kith and kin” (68).

Pi’s version of the unified story of religion in that moment was “Atman met Allah” (69). In Pi’s deepening vision of the sacredness of all life, he began to imagine “the presence of God” as being dispersed throughout Creation long before his ordeal at sea. For instance, in the “original landscape” of Pi’s religious imagination, Brahman or atman is not something limited to gods but is also embedded “in humans, animals, trees, in a handful of earth, for everything has a trace of the divine in it” (53). This seems to prepare Pi to respond affirmatively to the question, especially regarding Richard Parker: Do animals have a soul?

The notion of all of Creation being our neighbor, and that we have moral obligations to animals, may seem foreign to many fundamentalist contemporary Christians. However, there is a green stream in the Christian tradition that Pi seems to fuse with atman as the “world soul” and the expanding circle of kinship in Islam. The manner in which Pi embraces Christianity brings to mind in particular the Franciscan tradition, rooted in the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, the “patron saint of environmentalism” (House ix). This Christian saint taught that God was manifest, and must be worshipped, in all of creation, including and especially in the animal kingdom. His famous songs expressed his mystical view of the presence of Christ-consciousness in all creation: “Brother son, sister moon.”

Conclusion

Let us reconsider Pi’s comment about the importance of “concluding things properly,” made in reference to Richard Parker’s sudden exit from his life, and the tiger’s continuing haunting or “preying” on his imagination. In truth, the narratives of life include a plethora of “botched farewells.” Most often, it is only through stories that we have the chance, retrospectively, to “conclude things properly.” It is the function of better stories to connect the dots, to allow us to sight the bigger picture, to move beyond remorse to acceptance, and toward something like what all spiritual teachings aspire to, what the Rastas call “overstanding.”

Pi’s relationship with Richard Parker undergoes a clear evolution, much as one might expect with the development of any human friendship or love. The paralyzing fear with
which Pi begins soon shifts into a sort of professional concern, mixed with the sort of
guilt that one might feel for employing strong-arm techniques with a child, or leaning
too heavily on a friend. After successfully employing “animal psychology,” Pi begins to
feel guilty about the extremes to which he has gone in order to maintain a human-
animal balance: “it was not good zoo keeping I was up to, but psychological bullying”
(234).

The interdependence of Pi and Richard Parker, and with other animals that medi-
ate between Pi and the tiger, becomes ever more explicit. After ingesting his share of a
catch of turtle meat, Pi remarks, “It was frightening, the extent to which a full belly
made for a good mood” (236). The comment here could refer to either man or tiger, al-
though Pi appears to be talking about himself. This fright seems to be, in part, recog-
nition of how much like the tiger—he how animalistic—he has become. It is also significant
here that not only does he use turtle meat to keep the tiger in a good mood but he also
uses the turtle shell as a shield when he is “training” Richard Parker to accept him, the
human, as the hypothetical alpha male on board. But Pi increasingly acts like the tiger’s
servant: “Of whatever food I caught, Richard Parker took the lion’s share, so to speak. I
had little choice in the matter” (249). Serving the tiger, Pi identifies with him so much
that his narrative shifts into the plural: “We found ourselves [. . .]. We would rush up
[. . .]. I felt death was upon us,” and so on (250–51). The language here seems to echo
the unexpected shift into “we” in various seafaring portions of the book of Acts, such
as the shipwreck in Malta narrated in Acts 27:1–28:16. This New Testament narrative
itself has an intertextual relationship to classical accounts of shipwreck narratives,
specifically the *Odyssey*, books 5 and 12 (MacDonald).18 The man- and- tiger “we” here
may or may not reflect a supposed tendency in the sea voyage genre to shift into first-
person-plural narration.19 But it certainly supports Barrett’s observation that “in any
vehicle larger than a bicycle there may well be a number of passengers who become, for
a time, a community” (53). So the first-person-plural here stresses Pi’s move into com-
plete identification with Richard Parker as not only a member of his community, but in-
deed as his only real remaining family. He talks to the tiger about an “outbreak of
divinity” (259). After a close encounter with an oil tanker, he confesses a love so deep
that he is certain he would “die of hopelessness” without the tiger’s presence (262).
Swearing to return Richard Parker safely to land becomes his way of keeping hope alive.

Toward the end of the ordeal, Richard Parker even responds to Pi’s question: “Have
you ever killed a man?” (273). This section echoes other stories in which apparently ra-
tional men, stranded for long periods in the wilderness or the desert, engage in dia-
logue with imaginary beings, such as the pilot who dialogues with an extraterrestrial boy
in *The Little Prince*.

In objective terms, Pi has become delusional by this point. But his delusion serves,
in narrative terms, to reinforce just how fully traditional animal-human relationships
have been inverted. When Pi thinks he is dying, his greatest concern is for his tiger-
master: “I had failed as a zookeeper” (268). Pi’s presumably imagined conversations
with the tiger and with a blind French cook who is a cannibal, above all, causes the
Japanese investigators to disbelieve his story. "We believe what we see," they insist, echoing Mr. Kumar the Marxist (30, 326). Trying to please them, or to prove his point that all stories contain elements of invention, Pi related a "story without animals [. . .] that won't surprise you" (336). But afterward, the unbelieving Japanese admit that "The story with animals is the better story" (352).

It was through the story with animals that Pi sighted God anew. The scientists, speaking perhaps for secular readers, understand it as a story "unparalleled in this story of shipwrecks" (354), rather than one that inspired faith. In their concluding words they have moved beyond skepticism to a sort of secular awe. If this is the belief in God that the story has inspired, it must be something like the faith of Frederick Douglass, who later in life remarked that it was only through the acts of conscious men and women that he "could get a glimpse of God anywhere" (Gibson 595). In the acts of heroic and conscious men like young Pi, contemporary secular readers may achieve at least a fleeting glimpse of the power of faith. And by looking toward their God through Pi's eyes, outside of the habits imposed by institutional religion, religious readers may glimpse a new vision of that God's dwelling place.20

Notes

1. Yann Martel, interview by Ray Suarez. Martel told Suarez that he was looking for "something that would direct my life."

2. This review was published by the host of the Pequod website, who writes under the pen name "Ishmael."

3. The study of slave narratives has been influential in scholarship on narratives of ascent. See Stepto on narratives of ascent and the narrative of immersion. Regarding the ancient roots and postmodern reimaginings of the ascent narrative, see Gleason. This tradition developed in relation to descent narratives, classical examples being Orpheus's descent to rescue Eurydice from Hades, and Dante's Divine Comedy. See also Falconer. In the Western tradition, ascent tends to follow a descent, while in some tribal cultures, ascent can only be actualized if followed by a descent—to the earth, to carry teachings down to the suffering masses, etc. See Edelman.

4. Salman Rushdie cited in Appignanesi and Maitland. After the Satanic Verses fatwa, Rushdie noted in an interview with the Independent (30 Dec. 1990) that although he had once emphasized the absence in that "God-shaped hole," the shape now seemed more important.

5. In Les rites de passage (1909) anthropologist Arnold van Gennep described rites of passage such as marriage or coming-of-age rituals as having a three-part structure: separation, liminal period, and reassimilation. Victor Turner popularized the concept of liminality as a "threshold experience" beginning in the early 1960s. See Turner, "Betwixt and Between" and "Liminality and Communitas."

6. The bildungsroman "charts the protagonist's actual or metaphorical journey from development from youth to maturity." See Rau.

8. Ishmael notes that a move away from the gadgets which make us “seem closer to machines than mammals on the evolutionary scale” is normative in castaway narratives. “The castaway loses all such objects [. . .]. In Robinson Crusoe, just as Crusoe seems to have built and adapted to his new environment there is an earthquake. His house collapses—his technology fails—but in the process his belief in God [. . .] is awakened. Likewise as Pi’s boat rusts, his clothes decay, his survival rations run out, Pi becomes increasingly sensitive to the natural embodied in the tiger [. . .] more aware of what fundamentally distinguishes human and not beast.”

9. Margaret Atwood’s blurb on the paperback edition of Life of Pi, excerpted from a review in the London Sunday Times, describes it as “a finely twisted length of yarn—yarn implying a far-fetched story you can’t quite swallow whole, but can’t dismiss outright.”

10. “Expressions like ‘wasting time’ are metaphors we live by” (Lakoff and Johnson 55). “Our conventional ways of talking about some things presuppose [a] metaphoric concept and we are hardly ever conscious of their use” (Romero and Belén 6).

11. Crusoe was adapted from the real-life adventure of Alexander Selkirk. Thomas Keymer argues that Crusoe is in fact a “striking [. . .] reversal of the standard trajectory of castaway tales, which involve not the construction of a miniature civilization but extremes of degradation or even derangement: more Lord of the Flies than Robinson Crusoe” (Defoe xxiv). See also Pupo-Walker.

12. David Partikian discusses the idea that “unbelievable” tales—tales that defy logic—are an integral part of most religions. In order to have faith and believe in God, or the unknowable, we need to believe in stories that otherwise seem fictional, such as the biblical accounts of the Fall of man, and Jonah and the Whale, or the tales of the Ramayana. Life of Pi is similarly a tale that asks the reader to suspend disbelief and have faith; it is only through this suspension that a person is able to read “a story to make you believe in God.”

13. “Consistent among approaches to survivor narratives [. . .] is the notion of a double structure through which a survivor articulates past and present versions of the self and the traumatic experience” (Duncan 173–74).


15. “By the Rivers of Babylon,” adapted by Brent Dowe and Trevor McNaughton of the Melodians, reached a mass audience on the soundtrack from The Harder They Come (Island 1972). It was later recorded in a version that topped the British pop charts in 1978. The song has also been recorded by Sublime, Steve Earle, and Sweet Honey in the Rock, among many others.


17. Chevannes gives a classic overview of the Rasta worldview and their language. For a straightforward discussion of Rasta talk, see Nichols.

18. The account of Paul’s shipwreck also bears similarities to the shipwreck narrative in the Aeneid. See D’Evelyn.

19. Robbins argued that a key feature of the genre of sea voyage narratives in Greek and Roman literature “is the presence of first person plural narration.” See his “By Land and by
Sea.” Robbins’s theory has been widely criticized; for an overview of his detractors, see Kirby.

20. Fernando, “Life of Pi.” Fernando argues that the suffering and ultimate spiritual resurrection that Pi experiences parallel the suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and at the end of the novel, similar to Jesus, Pi offers his own parables about the meaning of faith.

Works Cited


