



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 13 (2011)

Too Hard to Believe?

A Reading of Religious Eclecticism in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

Jeffrey W. Robbins, Lebanon Valley College

An Essay

[1] “I have a story that will make you believe in God” (Martel: x) – that is how Yann Martel introduces his novel, *Life of Pi*, in which the main character, the aforementioned Pi, is simultaneously a Hindu, Christian, and Muslim. He is also a trained zoologist who, when he was only 16 years old, miraculously survived 227 days in the Pacific Ocean as the lone human survivor of a sunken ship. Surviving 227 days adrift at sea is hard enough to believe, but add a 450-pound Bengal tiger into the lifeboat and this existential parable is ratcheted up from the inspiring to confounding, from the miraculous to outright unbelievable – which, by the way, is exactly the point of the story. After all, if the story did not stretch the limits of believability, how else could it make its readers believe the unbelievable, to believe in God.

[2] But while the story is introduced with this promise to the reader, what at first appears straightforward becomes increasingly complicated or obscured as the story unfolds. For instance, in which God is this story supposed to make us believe – the Hindu, the Christian, or the Muslim? The novel does not say. Instead, it offers a continuous narrative of Pi's successive introduction and entrance into these three respective and distinctive faith traditions. Pi tells us that he is a Hindu because his Aunt first brought him to a temple for a traditional Hindu rite of passage when he was still a baby. While he has no conscious memory of this first introduction to the temple, he writes that “some smell of incense, some play of light and shadow, some flame, some burst of colour, something of the sultriness and mystery of the place must have stayed with me. . . I became loyal to these sense impressions

even before I knew what they meant or what they were for” (Martel: 47-48). Thus, in Pi’s words, he owes “to Hinduism the original landscape of [his] religious imagination” (Martel: 50), and the universe continues to make sense to him through his Hindu eyes.

[3] Though he was “a contented Hindu” when he was 14 years-old, he became both deeply enthralled and troubled the first time he heard the story of Jesus. The story of Jesus was the Christian story that proclaimed to be about God, but not as God *should* be, or at least not as Pi had come to expect the stories of God to be told. As Pi asked, the story of Jesus tells the story of a God “who goes hungry, who suffers from thirst, who gets tired, who is sad, who is anxious, who is heckled and harassed, who has to put up with followers who don’t get it and opponents who don’t respect Him – what kind of god is that?” (Martel: 55). Nevertheless, the more Pi speaks with the village priest about this thoroughly pedestrian god, the more enthralled he becomes to the point that he asks what he must do to become a Christian. The priest smiled and answered, “You already are, Piscine – in your heart.” From that point on, Pi could then enter into the church without fear, for, as he says, “it was now my house too. I offered prayers to Christ, who is alive. Then I raced down the hill on the left and raced up the hill on the right – to offer thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way” (Martel: 58). A prayer of thanks to Lord Krishna for having made him a Christian is an unc customary prayer indeed, [and](#) a portent of things to come.

[4] Then, again in Pi’s words, “Islam followed right behind, hardly a year later.” [W](#)hen walking the streets of the Arabic neighborhood while exploring unknown parts of his hometown in Pondicherry, India, he shares bread with a Muslim baker and observes the baker interrupt his work in order to perform his daily prayers right in the midst of a storm of flour. Pi observes, “So it went the first time I saw a Muslim pray – quick, necessary, physical, muttered, striking. Next time I was praying in church – on my knees, immobile, silent before Christ on the Cross – the image of this callisthenic communion with God in the middle of the bags of flour kept coming to my mind” (Martel: 60). Soon after, Pi would ask his parents for his own prayer rug, and that same Muslim baker would initiate him into the mysteries of Sufi mysticism.

[5] Pi was now a practicing Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, and the prized student of all three faiths. That is, until his parents and teachers discovered his secret and together expressed their uniform incredulity. After each tried to claim the boy as their own, their attitudes shifted from their suspicion of one another, to their shared breathlessness and disbelief, and finally to their mutual disappointment in Pi. Each of their respective arguments for the exclusivity of their faith failed: from the imam, “Hindus and Christians are idolaters;” from the pandit, “Muslims have many wives;” and “Christians know nothing about religion;” and from the priest, “There is salvation only in Jesus.” As the Christian sees it, it is the difference between “*real* religion – or myths;” for the Muslim, it is between “God – or idols;” and for the Hindu, it is between “Our [Indian] gods – or colonial gods.” As for Pi’s parents, they sought to protect their son, thinking that his religious eclecticism was nothing more than a stage he would eventually grow out of. Pi’s father, trying to split the difference, reminded the three religious leaders that the new India was a country that allowed for the freedom of religious practice, which finally prompted some agreement from the teachers: “Yes! *Practice* – singular!” All agreed that Pi’s piety was admirable, “But he can’t be a Hindu, a Christian

and a Muslim. It's impossible. He must choose." Poor Pi, in the simplicity of his boyhood faith, he sincerely believed that all religions were true. Out of his embarrassment and at the close of this first introduction to inter-religious dialogue, he blurted out, "I just want to love God" (Martel: 67-69).

[6] So which God indeed, and by whose prayers? But that is not the only complication from the novel. A story that promises to make you believe in God would presumably be a story about God – about God's goodness or grace, God's power or design – something, anything to compel us to believe. But not so with *Life of Pi*. While it does depict the confounding religious eclecticism of its central character, it says little or nothing about God, and makes no argument for God's existence. By the time you come to the end of the story, like the investigators who interrogated Pi about the causes of the shipwreck, you are not sure whether the story you have heard is even true or not, whether Pi is reliable and trustworthy, or delusional at best. That is because on one level his story of surviving 227 days at sea with a 450-pound Bengal tiger cannot be confirmed. When Pi washed up on shore, the tiger was never found. But above and beyond whether or not it can be confirmed, it is a story that is simply too hard to believe. So after much skepticism and disbelief from the investigators, Pi told another story of his survival. This time without the tiger, without the island paradise, and full of deceit and despair in which Pi's survival was only made possible by his descent into cannibalism. As Pi explains, neither story explains the sinking of the ship, neither story can be proven true or false. He states, "In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer," in which case, "since it makes no factual difference," the question becomes, "which story do you prefer? Which is the better story?" (Martel: 317)

[7] Before choosing which God to believe in, a choice has to be made about which story to believe – as Pi depicts it, a story with or without the animals, and thus, with or without the surprises – one that requires believing the unbelievable or another that requires nothing more than "crude reality" and "yeastless factuality" (Martel: 302). More fundamental still, therefore, is the question of how to decide when it comes to questions of belief. Is it a matter of truth or desire, the straight facts or an interesting story? After all, as Pi puts it, "What is [the] problem with hard to believe?" (Martel: 297).

After Disenchantment

[8] From the hard to believe to the all-too-apparent, from a story of the possibilities of belief to the history of lost faith and religion's promise unfulfilled – for many, this is the state of religion in the contemporary world. From the ongoing problems of religious violence, to the uneasy alliance of religion and politics, and the continuing rift between religion and science, or more broadly, between faith and rationality, the modern world has clearly taken its toll on religion, leading to that rich descriptive term for the modern process of secularization bequeathed to us by Max Weber: "disenchantment," with the world and with religion, if not with the very idea of God itself. Disenchantment is a term for loss, but even more, it is a term rich in pathos – more than simply a lost innocence or coming of age, it speaks to the very heart of the human condition by making a claim about the sense of awe and wonder at the world that gives birth to the so-called religious impulse. But what comes after disenchantment?

[9] This is an important question, not only for understanding the state of religion in the contemporary world, but also for examining the possibilities that the image and practice of religious eclecticism provides as a model for peace. For instance, Marcel Gauchet, in his book *The Disenchantment of the World*, which is an effort to provide a functional definition of religion by examining the political history of religion, chronicles the systematic and irreversible retreat of religion from the public sphere. He writes, “When dealing with religion what appears to be an advance is actually a retreat” (10). Rather than seeing the “so-called ‘major religions’ or ‘universal religions’ . . . as the quintessential embodiment of religion,” Gauchet sees them instead as “just so many stages of [religion’s] abatement and disintegration” (9). This history is in fact a retreat because as religion has become more and more “universal,” more and more “rational,” and more and more “advanced,” it ironically becomes the precondition for society’s departure and independence from religion. More specifically, Gauchet dates the beginnings of this departure with the emergence of the state, as a consequence of which “religion has been systematically exhausted and its legacy has gradually disappeared” (9).

[10] In offering this analysis, Gauchet is careful not to suggest that people are no longer religious, but rather that religion, and more precisely, religious institutions, have lost their “age-old organizing influence” in society. A historic reversal has taken place from religion dominating politics to politics dominating religion, from religion preceding and legitimating the political order to the political order, “by virtue of its spiritual potentialities, [preceding] the systems of sacred rites supposed to justify it” (14).

[11] Further, what distinguishes Gauchet’s analysis from the standard sociological reading of secularization is how he shows that this process through which the religious has been “systematically exhausted” is a process that is *imminent* to the history of religions itself. In other words, it is not simply because the modern world discovered in Enlightenment rationality an alternative explanatory system or a new faith, but rather the seeds of religion’s demise were planted firmly within the very history of religion. What lead to the systematic exhaustion of religion was not the external critiques lodged *against* religion from without, but from the *internal development of* religion from within. It is the very logic of religious theism (and for the political history of religion in the west, the very specificity of Christianity in the logic of the incarnation) that eventually reconciles, and thereby inverts, God’s absolute remoteness with the affirmation of this world. In Gauchet’s words, as religion advances, “the terrestrial sphere acquired autonomous substantiality and became ontologically complete” (77). This is the “paradox of divine otherness,” wherein salvation comes not by turning away from the world, by looking outside this world, or by depending on some notion of the supernatural. On the contrary, salvation is attained by investment in the world, by the realization of its “ultimate ontological self-sufficiency” (96). Again, in Gauchet’s words, “So preoccupation with the other, which initially caused a turn away from the sensory, reached the point of demanding that it be completely appropriated and transformed” (78). It is precisely this *theo*-logic that establishes the necessary precondition for the eventual independence of art, science, and politics from religion. But also this historic reversal or inversion is ironically also the fulfillment or realization of the religious tradition from which we are now so distanced.

[12] If Gauchet's reading of the political history of religion is correct, and we accept that "the religious has reached the end of its life in the modern world" (3), then what do we make of the so-called "return of the religious," let alone the story of Pi and the possibilities of belief? One answer is provided by the sociologist of religion Steve Bruce, perhaps the leading contemporary advocate of the secularization thesis. Like Gauchet, Bruce agrees that secularization is imminent to the history of religion, especially in the West as a result of the forces of individualism and the consequent religious fragmentation that resulted from the Protestant reformation. Unlike Gauchet, however, for Bruce the modern processes of secularization do not imply the exhaustion of, or retreat from, religion. Rather, it suggests that the form or structure of religion has been radically transformed. From a relatively homogenous religious population overseen and regulated by a single religious institution that was co-extensive with society – in short, a religious monopoly – to religious diversification, fragmentation, and the widespread dispersal of religious authority, the regulatory function of religion has been dramatically weakened. This change in the structure of religion has allowed the flowering of new religious movements and, according to Bruce, has made religious eclecticism the dominant form of religion in the postmodern world:

If the *church* was the dominant form of religion in the pre-Reformation world, the *sect* its embodiment in the early modern period, and the *denomination* its classic form in the twentieth century, the emblem of religion for the twenty-first century is the *cult*. The decline in the main traditions has allowed a flowering of new religions and 'New Age' innovations. . . There is no longer any idea that there is one truth, one correct body of knowledge. Instead there is individual preference. If it works for you, it is true (4-5).

[13] A few points of clarification about Bruce's analysis: first, Bruce is not using the term "cult" in a pejorative sense. With this term he has something specific in mind and is drawing from the classic religious typology first offered by Ernst Troeltsch. Bruce defines the cult as "a small loosely knit group organized around some common themes and interests but lacking a sharply defined and exclusive belief system. Each individual member is the final authority as to what constitutes the truth or path to salvation" (82). Second, when trying to identify the dominant religious characteristics of the present age, and by defining postmodern religiosity according to its "New Age" innovations, for Bruce the question is not how many people identify themselves as "New Agers," but rather, to what extent are people influenced by New Age beliefs? The importance of this distinction can be seen by distinguishing involvement from commitment – many are involved, but few are committed, which only further reinforces his thesis regarding religious eclecticism being the dominant form of religion in the postmodern world. As he writes, "It seems to be the case that we are happy with astrology as a 'bit of fun,' a 'laugh,' but regard as deviant those who take it too seriously. Thus the same tabloid newspapers which carry horoscopes roundly condemned the wife of President Reagan when a biographer claimed that Nancy's advice to her husband was influenced by the professional astrologer she regularly consulted" (201). Third, by speaking of religious eclecticism, Bruce is referring to the blurring of divisions and boundaries, and the weakening of religious institutions and organizations, which results in "a milieu in which people acquire, absorb, and learn a variety of beliefs and practices that they combine into their own pockets of culture" (200).

[14] What Bruce is describing is a generalized religious attitude of permissiveness, exploration, and experimentation in which no single authority has the scope, power, or influence to direct the collective energies of a population – in short, freedom. The question to both Gauchet and Bruce is whether – and if so, how – the realization of this freedom in its characteristic practice of religious eclecticism provides for peace? Is it true, as our politicians would have us believe, that freedom – whether in the marketplace in the form of free trade, in the polis in the form of democratic elections, or in religion in the form of religious eclecticism – sets us on an ineluctable path to peace?

Beyond the Limits of Believability

[15] *Life of Pi* is again instructive here. Recall at the outset that in addition to describing Pi as simultaneously a Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, it was also mentioned that he was a trained zoologist. This point of distinction is not incidental to the story and the development of its main character. For one, it provided a connection between Pi's old life in India and his new life in Canada, giving some continuity to a life story tragically interrupted at sea. While growing up as a young boy, Pi's father owned and operated the city zoo. Needless to say, this intimate knowledge of the life of a zookeeper gave Pi the necessary know-how to survive the long ordeal adrift at sea sharing a lifeboat with his 450-pound tiger companion (or at least so Pi would have us believe). But it was also at least partly the cause of the ordeal in the first place. The reason Pi and his family were traveling by boat across the Pacific was because they were bringing their zoo animals with them in order to liquidate their family assets by selling off the animals to the highest North American bidders. Thus, on one level, this story that would supposedly make its readers believe in a reversal of the Genesis story of Noah's ark. This time, God did not provide safe haven for the renewal of his creation, but instead, Pi, his family, and entire boatload of animals worthy of an entire zoo were almost entirely lost at sea. And but for the ingenuity of the 16 year-old Pi, all would certainly have been lost.

[16] In addition, Pi's education and training in the science of zoology brought balance to his mind. In spite of the worries of his religious teachers, this is no story of a fanatical religious enthusiast. Pi's mind was trained by the hard discipline of science. By his dual interest in both religion and science, he was able to discover the inherent limitations of both, and thus serves as yet another metaphor of the postmodern mind and its possibilities for reconciliation – not only between the religions by his religious eclecticism, but also between religion and science, or faith and rationality.

[17] But perhaps the main importance of Pi's experience as an educated and trained zoologist lies in what he himself has to say about the link between animals and religion – or, more specifically, between the critique of zoos and the critique of religion. It is here that the paradox between religion and freedom becomes most apparent. Early in the novel Pi states, "I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion. Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are 'happy' because they are 'free.'" The zoo is seen as a kind of prison wherein the 'happiness' of the animal is dashed. Pi continues, "Being denied its 'freedom' for too long, the animal becomes a shadow of itself, its spirit broken. So some people imagine" (Martel: 15-16). However, Pi knows this is not the way it is, that this criticism is nothing more than a projection or an idealization.

Then, after going into detail about the lives of compulsion and necessity that animals in the wild actually live, he stops himself short:

But I don't insist. I don't mean to defend zoos. Close them all down if you want (and let us hope that what wildlife remains can survive in what is left of the natural world). I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both. (Martel: 19)

[18] By drawing on Gauchet and Bruce, I have chronicled what is still the standard reading of the trajectory of religion in the modern world wherein modernization is equated with secularization, and secularization with freedom. While there is a contrasting tone in these two works – for instance, Gauchet suggests a tragic irony to the history of religion as its advance is simultaneously its retreat, whereas Bruce sees the former vertical integration of religious thought and religious institutions giving way to the more horizontal disintegration of religion by the radical dispersal of religious authority and the diversification of religious beliefs and practices – the trajectory itself is basically the same. Thus, when Martel writes that *Life of Pi* is a story that will make you believe in God and when he speaks of the certain illusions of freedom that plague both the zoo and religion, he is not so much making an argument for the existence of God as he is issuing a fundamental challenge about many of our most basic assumptions.

[19] First, with regard to Pi's practice of religious eclecticism, this is not a sign of a wishy-washy faith or a lack of commitment as if Pi could not decide which tradition he liked best so he appropriated them all. (I am tempted to say here, that this is not a case of Pi having his cake and eating it too.) This would confuse eclecticism with agnosticism, and Pi is clear about his rejection of agnosticism as a viable philosophy of life. As he states when mentioning the respect he had for his boyhood science teacher, the first atheist he ever knew, "It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while . . . But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation" (Martel: 28). And later, he mocks agnostics for their lack of imagination:

I can well imagine an atheist's last words: "White, white! L-L-Love! My God!" – and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dray, yeastless factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, "Possibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain," and, to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story. (Martel: 64)

Pi is clear, therefore, that human beings have no choice but to choose, but that does not mean that the choices we make have to be exclusive, or that they necessarily cut us off from the possibilities of future discoveries. Religious eclecticism, at least as understood and practiced by Pi, requires just as much a leap of faith as the archetypal conversion experience, with the choice being to love God no matter where it leads.

[20] Second, though Gauchet and Bruce are correct that the current cultural milieu might minimize the external compulsion in religion, it would be a mistake to equate this form of

secularization with freedom, and even more to assume that this allowance for the flowering of new religious movements and ideas would necessarily lead to peace. While we hold certain illusions of freedom, and the allure of freedom can be seen in the political, economic, and religious spheres, we remain just as much determined by our cultural traditions as ever, even as those traditions have been broadened to include a greater knowledge of the other and a greater realization of our interrelatedness and interdependency. Not to mention the limitations experience places on our freedom. Think again of Pi, who as a boy in route to a new life with his family suffered the tragic loss of everything he knew and loved. There was no going back. And it was only the brute struggle for survival under the most circumscribed conditions that gave him a future. So whether the critique is of the zoo or religion, the illusions and allure of freedom must be tempered by the inevitable realities of our circumscribed condition.

[21] Third, and in conclusion, why and how would this story make us believe in God? As for the why, Pi makes that clear – the story with the animals and the surprises is the much more interesting story. According to this logic, we believe in God because we *desire* the more interesting story. Religious belief is more about desire than it is about truth. As for the how, at some point facts give way to beliefs just as the telling of one's experience always becomes a story. The difference is not between belief and facts, but between a story that stretches the limits of believability and a story without surprises. The one is deeply unsettling as it renders the future uncertain, whereas the other merely confirms what we already know or assume. This is a story that makes us believe in God, therefore, because by proving the possibility – indeed, the inevitability – of belief it simultaneously engenders a belief in possibility, even when that possibility is the seemingly impossible belief in God.

Bibliography

Bruce, Steve

1996 *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gauchet, Marcel

1997 *The Disenchantment of Religion: A Political History of Religion*. Translated by Oscar Burge. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Martel, Yann

2001 *The Life of Pi*. New York: Harcourt.