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## The “Real Story” or the “Better Story”: Faith and Reason Representations in Life of Pi

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### Abstract

Yann Martel’s 2001 bestselling novel *Life of Pi*, later adapted into an acclaimed film in 2012, explores fundamental questions about religion, faith, and imagination in relation to reason and science. This paper examines the cultural tension between scientific rationality and religious faith as represented in the novel and film, analyzing Martel’s sophisticated literary challenge to this dichotomy. Through its parallel narratives—one featuring animals and the other humans—the novel presents two cultural modes of engaging with reality: one infused with faith and meaning, the other guided solely by rational explanation. Placing Martel in dialogue with Martin Buber, William James, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Jonathan Sacks, this study demonstrates how *Life of Pi* dramatizes the choice between competing life-stories, each representing a distinct cultural grammar for encountering the world. Drawing on Jewish theological sources, the paper argues that Martel’s literary achievement transcends mere pragmatic defense of religion to advocate for a mode of existence integrating both scientific understanding and religious wonder, suggesting that faith constitutes not a set of beliefs but a distinctive mental and cultural stance toward reality.

**Keywords:** Yann Martel; *Life of Pi*; Faith and Science; Religion and Reason; Literary Imagination; Wonder; Martin Buber; William James; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Abraham Joshua Heschel; Jonathan Sacks.

“A world without religious faith is a world without sustainable grounds for hope. It may have optimism, but that is something else, and something shallower, altogether. ... Most of us recognise tragedy, and most of us have experienced hope. But a culture that sees the universe as blind and indifferent to humanity generates a literature of tragedy, and a culture that believes in a God of love, forgiveness and redemption produces a literature of hope. There was no Sophocles in ancient Israel. There was no Isaiah in ancient Greece.” (Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks)

### INTRODUCTION

Yann Martel’s bestselling 2001 novel *Life of Pi*, later adapted into an acclaimed 2012 film, explores fundamental questions about religion, faith, imagination, and their relationship to science. The author opens with an audacious promise: “I have a story that will make you believe in God” (x) [1].<sup>1</sup> The novel emerged from Martel’s personal spiritual crisis, likely influenced by what Max Weber termed the “disenchantment of the world [2].”<sup>2</sup> In his preface, Martel confesses, “This book was born as I was hungry” (vii)—a hunger that is spiritual rather than physical. His aim is to liberate readers from what he views as the trap of rational skepticism, which he characterizes as “fool’s gold for the bright” (5). He particularly critiques those he calls “muddled agnostics who didn’t know which way was up,” suggesting they “lack imagination and miss the better story” (65).

Pi, the nickname of a young Indian boy named Piscine Molitor Patel, is a spiritually curious child who embraces all the religions available in his childhood home of Pondicherry: Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. He declares that “many people seem to lose God along life’s way. That was not my case” (47). For him, “religion is more than rite and ritual” (48), for he senses the essence common to all religions beyond the rituals which divide them: “[for] Hindus, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat-wearing Muslims” (50). But make no mistake, *Life of Pi* does not study established religious dogmas; in fact, it shies away from them. Three representative figures—a Hindu sage, a priest, and an Imam—encounter Pi as he strolls on the beach with his family. Exhorting Pi to choose among their faiths, they proclaim, “[H]e can’t be a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim. It’s impossible. He must choose” (69). Pi, in turn, responds, “Bapu Gandhi said, ‘All religions are true’” (ibid.). The book deals not with the content of faith, but with a deeper stratum; it seeks to uncover faith itself, the foundation common to all religions. In other words, *Life of Pi* does not ask “what am I to believe in?”—a question which sets various faiths at odds with each other—but rather something more fundamental—“what is belief?”. To examine this question, *Life of Pi* explores the relationship between religious faith and reason.

The second, larger part of the book recounts Pi’s extraordinary tale of survival. His early life is shaped by his father Santosh’s role as director of the Pondicherry Zoo, where Pi enjoys a childhood surrounded by animals. During India’s political turbulence of the 1970s, Pi’s parents decide to emigrate to Canada, arranging to transport their zoo animals aboard a Japanese cargo ship named the *Tsimtsum*—a term derived from Jewish Kabbalistic thought [3].<sup>3</sup> The ship mysteriously sinks (112-113), leaving Pi as the sole human survivor; his family, the crew, and all other passengers perish. What follows is Pi’s 227-day ordeal across the Pacific Ocean. He finds himself adrift in a lifeboat with four surviving zoo animals: a hyena, a Bengal tiger, an orangutan, and a zebra with a broken leg. Pi witnesses a brutal sequence of events — the hyena kills both the zebra and orangutan, only to be subsequently torn apart by the tiger. To survive, Pi must learn to coexist with this fearsome companion, a tiger named Richard Parker [4,5].<sup>4</sup> He masters the challenge of maintaining dominance over the tiger while securing their shared needs—fishing for sustenance, rationing water, and managing limited supplies. After months of hardship, terror, and despair, Pi eventually washes ashore in Mexico and receives medical care. When representatives of the Japanese shipping company interview him about the *Tsimtsum*’s sinking, they express skepticism about his account. At their urging, Pi provides an alternative version of events—one aligned with scientific rationality.

Pi’s second version, occupying merely fifteen pages in the book’s final section, presents a starkly different narrative. In this account, the survivors are all human: Pi, his mother, the ship’s cook, and a sailor suffering from a broken leg. When infection threatens the sailor’s life, the group attempts to save him through amputation, but he succumbs to the procedure. The cook soon reveals his true nature—a gluttonous man who not only consumes all the lifeboat’s provisions but also turns to cannibalism, feeding on the dead sailor’s remains. The situation deteriorates when a confrontation erupts between the cook and Pi’s mother, ending in her murder. Pi, driven by vengeance and despair, kills the cook in retaliation. Faced with the desperate choice between death and survival, Pi resorts to cannibalism himself, consuming the cook’s body. This version strips away the allegorical elements of the first account, presenting a raw portrait of human brutality. Here, it is not the Bengal tiger but human beings themselves who prove capable of savage violence.

The Japanese businessmen discern the parallel structure between the two narratives. Each character in the second version has a corresponding animal counterpart in the first: the injured sailor parallels the crippled zebra; Pi’s mother mirrors the orangutan; the cook corresponds to the hyena; and Pi himself is manifested as the Bengal tiger. The narrative progression remains identical: the zebra/sailor succumbs to gangrene following the leg amputation and falls prey to the hyena/cook. The orangutan/Pi’s mother confronts the hyena/cook in an attempt to stop his brutal behavior, but this intervention leads to her demise when the hyena/cook retaliates fatally. Finally, in an act of poetic justice, the Bengal tiger/Pi destroys and consumes the hyena/cook. Having presented both versions, Pi confronts the question of verifiability. Unable to prove either account “true,” he challenges the Japanese officials to choose between the narratives:

“I told you two stories that account for the 227 days in between. [...] Neither explains the

sinking of the Tsintsum. [...] You can't prove which story is true and which is not. [...] In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer. [...] So tell me [...] which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?"

Mr. Okamoto: "That's an interesting question..."

Mr. Chiba: "The story with animals."

Mr. Okamoto: "Yes. The story with animals is the better story."

Pi Patel: "Thank you. And so it goes with God." (Silence) (316-317)

The novel's opening promise—"I have a story that will make you believe in God"—finds its fulfillment in the juxtaposition of two concluding narratives. The first version, featuring the animals and deemed "the better story," culminates in the insight that "so it goes with God." This narrative embodies faith but is more nuanced than a simple allegory. Rather than contradicting the second account, it demonstrates the potential harmony between faith and reason. The second version, by contrast, represents reason divorced from faith—a worldview that could be characterized as atheism. Through this parallel structure, Martel shifts the central question from factual veracity toward something more profound: not which story is true, but which story is better.

### THE FAITH OF PI: RELIGION AND SCIENCE

What is faith? What does it mean to believe? A prevalent understanding views religion as a hierarchical system built upon foundational beliefs. According to this view, if these fundamental beliefs are undermined, the entire edifice of faith must collapse. Religious faith is thus conceived as a multi-story building resting on deep foundations—foundations that, when eroded by modern science, threaten the structure's integrity. David Hume articulated this perspective through his systematic, skeptical critique of theological and philosophical foundations [6],<sup>5</sup> contributing to a view that positions scientific advancement as faith's replacement. Various branches of atheistic thought have invested considerable effort in challenging religious doctrine, operating from the premise that religion requires these foundations [7,8].<sup>6</sup> This displacement of divine authority by scientific explanation found its most explicit expression in 1796, when French scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace, responding to Napoleon's inquiry about God's place in his scientific system, famously declared: *Je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse* - "I have no need for that hypothesis [9]."<sup>7</sup> In this view, the mechanistic universe requires no divine intervention; science alone suffices for explanation.

Yet *Life of Pi* reveals the naivety of this conception—both of religion itself and its cultural role in human existence. Religious engagement does not primarily stem from intellectual assent to fundamental beliefs. Religious education begins not with dogmas but with lived experience; participation in religious life does not require prior philosophical conviction. Similarly, people rarely abandon their faith solely due to theological doubts. This reductive understanding of faith and religious life fundamentally misses its essential nature.

The phenomenology of religious faith reveals a crucial distinction that Martin Buber identified in his comparative study of Jewish and Christian modes of belief [10].<sup>8</sup> Buber observed that biblical Hebrew lacks a term equivalent to the Greek *pistis* or Latin *credo* words denoting assent to propositions. Instead, the Hebrew *emunah* derives from the root א.מ.ן, signifying steadfastness, reliability, and fidelity. This linguistic observation carries profound cultural implications: it suggests that the biblical imagination conceived of faith not as doctrine but as relationship. Consider the paradigmatic moment when Abraham receives the divine promise of descendants. The text states: "And he trusted (*he'emin*) in the Lord, and He reckoned it to his merit" (Gen. 15:6). Abraham is not presented with a creed to accept or reject; rather, he enters into a relationship of trust despite circumstances that defy rational expectation [10].<sup>9</sup> The aged, childless man does not calculate probabilities; he responds to a voice that addresses him personally. This relational quality—what Buber elsewhere calls the I-Thou encounter—constitutes the core of biblical faith and resonates throughout *Life of Pi*.

Martel's protagonist inhabits precisely this mode of faith. Pi does not defend theological propositions; he cultivates relationships—with the divine, with Richard Parker, with the ocean itself. When Pi declares that "Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love" (208), he articulates a Buberian

vision of faith as encounter rather than assent. From this vantage point, the modern “conflict” between science and religion appears as a category error rooted in cultural misunderstanding: science addresses the I-It realm of objects and causation, while faith inhabits the I-Thou realm of meaning and relationship. Pi’s ability to embrace both zoology and religious studies—to honor both Mr. Kumars—reflects his intuitive grasp of this distinction.

William James approached the question of faith from a pragmatic cultural perspective, examining not what belief *is* but what belief *does* to the life of the believer [11].<sup>10</sup> Writing at the close of the nineteenth century, James witnessed a Western culture increasingly dominated by scientific positivism, in which religious faith appeared destined for extinction. Yet James observed something the positivists missed: that the choice between belief and unbelief is not merely an intellectual matter but a cultural and existential one, shaping how individuals navigate uncertainty, suffering, and the search for meaning.

In his essay “The Will to Believe,” James identified a category of life decisions he termed “live, forced, and momentous options”—choices where evidence alone cannot determine the outcome, yet where neutrality is impossible. Martel’s novel dramatizes precisely such a moment. When the Japanese investigators confront Pi’s two narratives, they face a forced option: they must file a report, must choose which story to record. No amount of additional evidence can resolve their dilemma. In such circumstances, James argued, the will legitimately participates in the formation of belief—and this participation carries profound consequences for how one inhabits the world. The believer, James observed, holds a decisive cultural and psychological advantage: the capacity to risk meaningful action despite uncertainty. The researcher who lacks faith in the value of his inquiry will abandon it before discovering its fruits; the artist who doubts the significance of his vision will never complete his work. Like Buber, James understands belief fundamentally as a mental attitude—an orientation toward existence that enables engagement with life’s possibilities—rather than adherence to specific propositions. From this vantage point, even a declared atheist scientist who dedicates his life to an unproven theory acts from an inner wellspring of faith. The central issue is not theological truth but the ethical dimension of how one should live.

Martel himself embodies this Jamesian sensibility. When asked in a 2010 interview whether he considers himself religious, he offered a response that captures the pragmatic cultural dimension of faith:

Do you consider yourself religious? I would say yes, in the broadest sense of the term, in the sense that I *choose* to believe that all this isn’t just the result of happenstance and chemistry. I find faith is a wonderful respite from being reasonable. We’re so trained in the West to be reasonable. It’s yielded great things—it’s resulted in these great technical prolepses that are very impressive, but they in and of themselves don’t give us a reason to live. In the modern Western technological society, it’s very hard to have any kind of faith. And so I took on religious faith and I finally came to agree with what I was discussing in the book. Religious faith makes life interesting [12].<sup>11</sup>

This is not a philosophical argument but a cultural stance—a decision about how to inhabit one’s own story.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophy offers yet another lens through which to understand Pi’s faith—one particularly suited to literary and cultural analysis. Wittgenstein famously argued that meaning derives from use within specific “language-games,” each governed by its own internal grammar [13,14].<sup>12</sup> Religious language, he suggested, does not function like scientific language; to treat religious statements as empirical hypotheses is to misunderstand their grammar entirely—a confusion that generates needless cultural conflict. Through careful analysis, Wittgenstein demonstrates that faith manifests not as a collection of truth-claims but as an expressive attitude. As Moshe Halbertal explains:

Expressions of faith do not impart information about the world but rather convey the relationship of the believer to the world and his life. For example, a religious statement such as “the world was created,” is not a factual description concerning the origins of the universe but rather expresses a perspective that views life and the world as a gift. Another religious

statement, such as “there will be a judgment day,” is not a factual prediction of a future event, but rather expresses the perspective of the believer who relates to life with a constant mindset of judgement and evaluation [15].<sup>13</sup>

Religious statements, in this view, belong to the realm of narrative and meaning-making rather than empirical description. This grammatical analysis illuminates a central literary puzzle in *Life of Pi*: how Pi can simultaneously embrace Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam without apparent contradiction. The religious authorities who insist “He must choose” (69) misunderstand the grammar of his faith. For Pi, these traditions are not competing truth-claims to be adjudicated by evidence; they are complementary stories that orient his existence toward the sacred, much as different literary genres illuminate different aspects of human experience. The novel itself enacts this principle: the “story with animals” and the “story without animals” are not contradictory accounts but different narrative grammars, each revealing truths inaccessible to the other. When the Japanese investigators choose the animal story, they demonstrate an intuitive grasp of what Wittgenstein understood theoretically: that some truths can only be told in certain ways.

Drawing together these cultural and philosophical insights, we can understand religious faith as a distinct mode of engaging with reality—one that differs significantly from scientific engagement yet remains compatible with it. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, himself a profound interpreter of the relationship between religious tradition and modern culture, articulated this complementarity with particular clarity:

Today Science is [...] used to reject religion. In fact, though, this whole idea is mistaken. Religion and science are completely different things and neither negates the other. [...] science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. And we need them both the way we need the two hemispheres of the brain. Science is about explanation. Religion is about interpretation. Science analyses, religion integrates. Science breaks things down to their component parts. Religion binds people together in relationships of trust. Science tells us what is. Religion tells us what ought to be. Science describes. Religion inspires [...]. Science is the conquest of ignorance. Religion is the redemption of solitude. [...] religion isn't about causes but about purposes. [...] We need science to understand the universe and religion to guide our way within it [16].<sup>14</sup>

Sacks's formulation captures what Pi intuits throughout his ordeal: that the question “what happened?” differs fundamentally from the question “what does it mean?” The first question belongs to the grammar of science and journalism; the second to the grammar of religion and literature. Both questions are legitimate; both deserve answers. The cultural error of modernity, Martel suggests, lies in supposing that one must exclude the other—that we must choose between the two Mr. Kumars rather than learning from both.

Pi's conception of belief aligns with the perspectives of Buber, James, Wittgenstein, and Sacks, who understand religious faith as fundamentally a mental and cultural stance rather than a set of propositions. Faith manifests not through doctrinal claims but through lived orientation, as evidenced in his description of a spiritual encounter: “When I say I saw her [the Virgin Mary], I don't quite mean it literally, though she did have body and colour. I felt I saw her, a vision beyond vision [...] The presence of God is the finest of rewards” (63). This understanding is tested profoundly when, in the aftermath of the *Tsimtsum's* sinking, Pi calls out:

Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed. And I am allowed no explanation? I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven? In that case, *what is the purpose of reason [...]*? Is it no more than to shine at practicalities—the getting of food, clothing and shelter? *Why can't reason give greater answers?* Why can we throw a question further than we can pull in an answer? Why such a vast net if there's so little fish to catch? (98).

Pi maintains a nuanced view of reason, acknowledging its vital practical role—“I applied my reason at every moment. Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit” (298). Yet he recognizes its limitations in providing “greater answers.” According to Martel [17], abandoning

faith and imagination<sup>15</sup> means losing the enchantment that infuses life with vitality and freshness [5,20].<sup>16</sup> The film adaptation powerfully illustrates this theme (minute 25), where Pi recounts how his father's insistence on a purely rational worldview stripped away his sense of the world's enchantment. This loss ultimately drives Pi's post-rescue career choice: studying three-toed sloths, creatures he describes as "wise beings whose intense imaginative lives were beyond the reach of my scientific probing [...]. The three-toed sloth, such a beautiful example of the miracle of life, reminded me of God" (5).

During Pi's youth in India, a pivotal encounter with his science teacher, Mr. Kumar, crystallized this tension between faith and reason. Shaped by his personal history of suffering and persecution, Mr. Kumar set scientific understanding against religious faith, ultimately declaring God's death:

"Religion?" Mr. Kumar grinned broadly. "I don't believe in religion. Religion is darkness. [...] There are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience. A clear intellect, close attention to detail and a little scientific knowledge will expose religion as superstitious bosh. God does not exist. [...] Some people say God died during the Partition in 1947. He may have died in 1971 during the war. Or he may have died yesterday here in Pondicherry in an orphanage. That's what some people say, Pi. When I was your age, I lived in bed, racked with polio. I asked myself every day, 'Where is God? Where is God? Where is God?' God never came. It wasn't God who saved me—it was medicine" (27-28).<sup>17</sup>

Pi rejects this simplistic view, choosing instead a telling silence: "I said nothing. [...] I was more afraid that in a few words thrown out he might destroy something that I loved. What if his words had the effect of polio on me? What a terrible disease that must be if it could kill God in a man" (28). Pi's belief is not in a theological God who solves the problem of suffering. For Pi, authentic faith transcends conventional theological responses to suffering, emerging from lived human experience rather than doctrinal abstractions. Such faith requires inner transformation rather than external argumentation. As he observes: "These people fail to realize that it is on the inside that God must be defended, not on the outside. They should direct their anger at themselves," adding that "the main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart" (71) [18,19].<sup>18</sup>

## THE BETTER STORY

Yann Martel employs a bold literary strategy in *Life of Pi*: the presentation of two parallel narratives that refuse easy reconciliation. In both versions, Pi endures suffering and confronts divine absence. Yet the first story, featuring the animals, emerges as what we might call a narrative of enchantment—a tale where meaning persists despite catastrophe, where Pi discovers presence even within absence. This paradox finds its most striking literary expression in Pi's inventory of his possessions, a passage whose form enacts its content. The list moves from the mundane to the cosmic, culminating in an item that transforms the entire catalogue:

1 boy with a complete set of light clothing but for one lost shoe  
1 spotted hyena  
1 Bengal tiger  
1 lifeboat  
1 ocean  
1 God (146)

The literary effect is remarkable: by placing "God" as simply another item in an inventory—grammatically equivalent to a shoe or a lifeboat—Martel simultaneously domesticates the divine and sacralizes the ordinary. This is not theology but poetics; the passage works not through argument but through the quiet shock of juxtaposition.

In contrast, the second story presents itself as purely “scientific,” stripped of divine presence. Here, Pi confronts absolute solitude—“‘We’re all alone, Piscine, all alone,’ she said, in a tone that broke every hope in my body” (307). The cultural stakes of this contrast become explicit in the novel’s climactic interrogation scene, when Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba—representatives of corporate rationality—demand what they consider “truth.” Pi’s gentle question—“Doesn’t the telling of something always become a story?”—challenges their positivist assumptions:

Mr. Okamoto: “But for the purposes of our investigation, we would like to know what really happened.”

“What really happened?”

“Yes.”

“So you want another story?”

“Uhh... no. We would like to know what really happened.”

“Doesn’t the telling of something always become a story?”

“Uhh... perhaps in English. In Japanese a story would have an element of invention in it. We don’t want any invention. We want the ‘straight facts,’ as you say in English.” (302)

Following Pi’s narration of the “scientific” account, the officials’ crucial observation that “his stories match” (311) points to Martel’s central literary insight: narrative truth operates differently from empirical truth. The two accounts are not competing hypotheses but complementary modes of meaning-making—one speaking the language of fact, the other the language of significance [20].<sup>19</sup> Martel crystallizes this principle in a brilliantly compact scene where two characters—both named Mr. Kumar—encounter a zebra at the zoo:

“This one’s a Grant’s zebra,” I said.

Mr. Kumar said, “*Equus burchelli boehmi*.”

Mr. Kumar said, “Allahu akbar.” (84)

The shared name is no accident. The science teacher classifies; the Sufi mystic worships. Latin taxonomy and Arabic devotion stand side by side, each responding authentically to the same creature. Martel offers no adjudication between them—the passage enacts the novel’s thesis that scientific and religious responses represent not rival truth-claims but different cultural grammars for encountering reality [4,20].<sup>20</sup>

Pi’s faith requires neither abandoning reason nor ignoring evil’s reality. It is fundamentally about perspective—a chosen mental stance toward existence. Through its dual narratives, *Life of Pi* challenges readers with an existential rather than epistemological question: not which story is true, but which offers a better way of being. Both accounts carry equal truth value, yet their significance lies beyond veracity. The essential question is one of authentic living: whether to embrace a life integrating science and faith, or one restricted to scientific understanding alone. Martel dramatizes this choice through an unexpected literary turn: Mr. Okamoto, the skeptic who demanded “straight facts,” ultimately validates the first story in his official report:

Story of sole survivor, Mr. Piscine Molitor Patel, Indian citizen, is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances. In the experience of this investigator, his story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks. Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger. (319)

Through this conclusion, Martel emphasizes that a story’s worth lies in its capacity to enchant—its vitality, its animating spark. While the second story may claim greater realism and scientific accuracy, these qualities alone do not make it superior. Martel signals this literary priority from the novel’s opening pages, reflecting on his own creative process: “You’ve done your research, gathering the facts—historical, social, climatic, culinary—that will give your story its feel of authenticity [...] but it all adds up to nothing. [...] An

element is missing, that spark that brings to life a real story, regardless of whether the history or the food is right” (viii-ix). Facts and reason, while fundamental, cannot by themselves confer meaning—they may “add up to nothing” without that essential spark of significance. This is Martel’s literary credo: accuracy serves story, not the reverse.

Martel’s literary vision resonates with a tradition of modern Jewish thought that similarly conceptualized the tension between religion and science as a choice between two narratives. These thinkers present faith and reason not as contradictory claims but as distinct cultural orientations—different ways of inhabiting the world. Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the twentieth century’s preeminent Jewish theologians, articulated this duality with poetic precision:

There seem to be two courses of human thinking: one begins with man and his needs and ends in assuming that the universe is a meaningless display or a waste of energy; the other begins in amazement, in awe and humility and ends in the assumption that the universe is full of a glory that surpasses man and his mind [21].<sup>21</sup>

Modern humanity, in its complete reliance on reason, has lost the capacity for amazement—even at the profound mystery of reason itself. As Heschel observed: “Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained,” noting that “The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all [21].”<sup>22</sup> Pi’s trajectory in the novel—from rational despair to wonder-infused survival—dramatizes precisely this recovery of amazement.

The theme of dual narratives finds its most systematic articulation in Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s work *The Great Partnership*. Sacks’s first chapter, titled “Two Stories,” articulates a strikingly parallel vision:

*The first:* In the beginning, some 13.7 billion years ago, there was an unimaginably vast explosion of energy, out of which the universe emerged for no reason whatsoever. [...] We, members of the species *Homo sapiens*, are wrong to believe that our questions and answers, hopes and dreams, have any significance whatsoever. [...] there is no one watching. There is no one to watch. [...] Why are we here? We just are. *The second:* The universe was called into being by One outside the universe [...] The One sent messages to this creature [...] But in striving to listen to the more-than-human, human beings learned what it is to be human, for in discovering God, singular and alone, they eventually learned to respect the dignity and sanctity of the human person, singular and alone. [...] Two rival views, each coherent and consistent, each simplified to be sure, but marking out the great choice, the two framing visions of the human situation. One asserts that life is meaningless. The other claims that life is meaningful. The facts are the same on both scenarios. So is the science that explains the facts. But the world is experienced differently by those who tell the first narrative and those who tell the second [22].<sup>23</sup>

Sacks repeatedly emphasizes that the religious narrative operates independently from science, neither competing with nor contradicting it: “Religion is about the question that remains when all the science is done. When we know all that can be known about what happened and how, we may still disagree on the meaning of what happened [22].”<sup>24</sup> Martel dramatizes this insight through Pi’s hard-won wisdom about reason’s limitations: “Reason comes to do battle for you. You are reassured. Reason is fully equipped with the latest weapons technology. But, to your amazement, despite superior tactics and a number of undeniable victories, reason is laid low” (161).

Martel makes a decisive literary choice. He champions the faith-infused narrative, expressing his preference through the novel’s opening promise: “a story that will make you believe in God” (x). His first narrative pulses with enchantment, vitality, hope, and gratitude—all rooted in the premise that life holds meaning. Sacks articulates the stakes of this choice:

In ancient times the gods were at best indifferent, at worst actively hostile to humanity.

Scientists like Jacques Monod and Steven Weinberg say the same about nature today, and within their own terms of reference they are right. Nature is sublimely indifferent to who we are and what we deserve. There is nothing moral about it; it carries no meaning within it. Myth and science in their different ways tell us how the parts are related. They cannot tell us what the totality means. Only something or someone outside the universe can give meaning to the universe. Only belief in a transcendental God can render human existence other than tragic. Individual lives, even within a tragically configured universe, may have meaning, but life as a whole does not. Bertrand Russell was right. Take God out of the equation, and we are left with unyielding despair. On this he was more honest than most of his successors [22].<sup>25</sup>

## A CONCLUDING NOTE

Is Pi's faith merely pragmatic, demonstrating religion's utilitarian value? Should we view religion as "false" yet worth embracing for its superior narrative? Does God simply join the inventory of human survival tools? The answer is emphatically no. Martel articulates something deeper—a distinct religious sensibility rooted in the experience of decentering oneself. Pi learns through suffering that one does not have complete control over life. This represents not an intellectual insight but a fundamental reorientation: an existential stance that positions one under the gaze of the sublime rather than presuming to gaze upon it. The Jewish mystic Hillel Zeitlin captures this distinction with remarkable literary precision: "What is the difference between wonder and astonishment? Wonder asks all sorts of questions. Astonishment asks nothing. It is like 'the one who does not know how to ask.' It stands confounded, amazed, blown away, transported. Wonder indeed gave birth to inquiry and all its branches—philosophy and science. Astonishment births religion and its sisters—poetry and music [23]."<sup>26</sup>

Although Pi maintains his faith in God, his faith in humanity erodes: "In time I gave up entirely on being saved by a ship. [...] No, humanity and its unreliable ways could not be counted upon" (199). Martel's cultural critique cuts deeper still. The novel's most enigmatic episode—the carnivorous floating island, life-sustaining by day yet lethal by night (chapter 92)—functions as an allegory for materialist society: abundant in provisions, yet spiritually corrosive. Pi repeatedly emphasizes the illusory nature of freedom as proclaimed by secular modernity. Through his zoo-keeper's wisdom, Martel challenges contemporary assumptions:

Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are "happy" because they are "free." [...] This is not the way it is.

Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low [...] What is the meaning of freedom in such a context? Animals in the wild are, in practice, free neither in space nor in time. (15-16)

I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both. (19)

Martel's cultural critique reveals that his treatment of religion transcends mere pragmatism. The displacement of reason from its central position constitutes the religious heart of *Life of Pi*. True religious consciousness emerges from humility—a stance that preserves space for wonder and mystery. The decision to believe in the sublime represents not pragmatic calculation but an authentic inner expression: submission, modesty, appreciation, and openness to wonder. This stance transforms one's experience of the everyday. As Pi declares, "I have survived so far, miraculously. Now I will turn miracle into routine. The amazing will be seen every day" (148)—a sentiment echoing the Jewish daily prayer: "We thank you, O Lord [...] for your miracles which accompany us every day" (*Shemoneh 'Esreh*). Secular modernity, placing reason alone at the center of consciousness, has forfeited this capacity for amazement. R. Nahman of Bratslav's lament serves as a fitting coda to Martel's novel: "Alas! Alas! The world is filled with amazing and awesome wonders and lights. But the small hand stands in front of the eyes and prevents them from seeing great lights [24]."<sup>27</sup>

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## NOTE

- 1 Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2001). All subsequent in-text citations refer to this edition.
- 2 On Max Weber's "disenchantment of the world" and the process of "rationalization," which he saw as the defining feature of modernity in the west, see Anthony J. Cascardi, "The Disenchantment of the World," in *The Subject of Modernity*, edited by Anthony J. Cascardi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 16-71.
- 3 For Martel's interpretation of the Kabbalistic concept of *tsimtsum*, see Daniel Reiser, "Tsimtsum in Life of Pi," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 20, no. 1 (2021): 107-143.
- 4 For analysis of this name's significance, see Florence Stratton, "'Hollow at the core': Deconstructing Yann Martel's Life of Pi," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29, no. 2 (2004): 11-12; Hamza Karam Ally, "'Which Story Do You Prefer?': The Limits of The Symbolic in Yann Martel's Life of Pi," *Literature and Theology* 34, no. 1 (2020): 90-91.
- 5 See David Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 6 For example, see Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Aviad M. Kleinberg, *A Guide for the Non-Believer: How to Not Believe Without Apologizing* (Tel Aviv: Aviad Kleinberg, 2019) [in Hebrew].
- 7 Walter William Rouse Ball, *A Short Account of the History of Mathematics* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 343.
- 8 Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: MacMillan, 1951).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 43-44.
- 10 William James, *The Will to Believe: and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 1-31.
- 11 Anna M. Yeung, "15 Questions with Yann Martel," *The Crimson*, April 23, 2010.
- 12 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 53-59; *idem.*, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 32.
- 13 Moshe Halbertal, "On Belief and Believers," in *On Faith: Studies in the Concept of Faith and Its History in The Jewish Tradition*, edited by Moshe Halbertal and Avi Sagi (Jerusalem: Keter Press, 2005), 31 [in Hebrew].
- 14 Jonathan Sacks, "On The Great Partnership" (video), 2018, [https://youtu.be/LltoUg\\_WL2k](https://youtu.be/LltoUg_WL2k).
- 15 On the close relationship between imagination and religious faith, see Daniel Reiser, *Imagery Techniques in Modern Jewish Mysticism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

- 16 Stratton, "Hollow at the core," 7-8; Gregory Stephens, "Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and 'the Better Story' in Life of Pi," *Intertexts* 14, no. 1 (2010): 50-51.
- 17 In the film it is Pi's father who tells him this, adding that religion is darkness, see minute 14:00-14:30.
- 18 This process of internalization is discussed in Martin Buber, *The Way of the Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 22-27. Such a religious approach stands at the root of the religious faith demonstrated by Etty Hillesum in her diary she wrote during the Holocaust; See Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002).
- 19 See Stephens, "Feeding Tiger, Finding God," 51.
- 20 See a similar (but also different) interpretation to "the two zebras": Karam Ally, "Which Story Do You Prefer?," 96-97. It seems that the two Mr. Kumars share the same name for they are two sides of the same coin. Science and religion, reason and faith, are two depictions of the same reality. Stephens has brilliantly noted that Pi received a double bachelor's in religious studies and zoology. This doubling of science and religion appears in relation to the two Mr. Kumars: "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). Science alongside religion constitutes Pi's worldview, see Stephens, "Feeding Tiger, Finding God," 44, 48.
- 21 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1976), 105.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 23 Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2021), 21-23.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 30-31
- 26 Hillel Zeitlin, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*, ed. and trans. by Arthur Green (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 2012), 131. "The one who does not know how to ask" (*she'eino yode'a lish'ol*) is one of the Four Sons mentioned in the Passover Haggadah. In traditional exegesis, "The one who does not know how to ask" represents an individual who has become disconnected from their Jewish roots. Zeitlin, however, employs this archetype as a metaphor for one who stands in astonishment, and consequently, is rendered speechless.
- 27 Nahman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Moharan* (Jerusalem: Nachal Pub., 2020), 1: §133. [in Hebrew]

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