

Dear Yann Martel,

I remember asking my mom one day in second grade, “Mommy, what’s a ‘terrorist?’” I noticed the word for the first time that day, when someone called me that in class. My mother was shocked, and wanted to meet my teacher to find out what had happened. I had to sit outside the room during their meeting, but it seemed that all my teacher could do was apologize after telling the other student never to call me that again.

It would be another three years before I actually learned the answer to my question, realizing that so few people understood my religion, or the many different kinds of people who practice it. But it wasn’t until I read *The Life of Pi* that I started to think about how blessed I’ve been to have a family who’s encouraged me to not only explore their faith, but to see the worthiness of others.

I was first introduced into Islam as an infant, but in a place where it was rarely accepted, so I learned relatively quickly to hide my religion from my peers. I never wanted to mention it until someone else asked, and was relieved that it didn’t happen often. Though I do honestly believe in the teachings of Islam and how they’ve brought me closer to God, I struggled to find the courage to share them.

Then Christianity was introduced to me as a young child, about first grade. I learned that God had chosen a special, faultless man to die for the worlds’ sins, ultimately being beaten and nailed to a cross. One day I asked my parents if it must have hurt him. Being Muslims, they believed in the existence of Jesus as a great prophet, but not in the same way that Christians believe Jesus to be both human and divine. Even so, I was awe-inspired by this man. He miraculously walked on water, cured the sick, and fed the hungry, and seemed much greater than any other prophet of the scriptures. Why did he die so easily? I once asked a priest about this, and he gave me the same answer Father Martin gave to Pi—Jesus died for love. Believing that love is the cure for the disease of sin, I instantly took Jesus into my life, performing all the Catholic sacraments at my school. My parents didn’t mind; they thought it was part of the curriculum, after all, and were accepting towards any religions I wanted to explore.

Hinduism was introduced to me by a childhood friend, around third or fourth grade. She was a very fun, friendly, outgoing person. I went to her house and even celebrated events like Diwali with her. This religion didn’t catch on to me as quickly, as I honestly couldn’t believe in its pantheon of gods, but the rich culture and Bollywood movies entranced me as a child. I couldn’t stop watching films like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, *Kal Ho Na Ho*, *3 Idiots*, and many more classics. I learned to appreciate the wonder in the stories of Ram and Sita. I thought it was a very joyful religion, just as Pi did, and while I may have doubted its factual truth, there was no doubt that it enriched the lives of those who practiced it.

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I have been introduced to many other religions, but these three have had the strongest influence on me. I find that I can understand Pi's connection to them, especially when I think back to my middle school years, when I felt like I was caught in a storm of my own and began to worry that no loving God would let me experience what I had. I was absolutely afraid to let anybody else know I was a Muslim, because they were constantly mocking my religion by shouting "allahu akbar" with stupid accents, and throwing around insulting stereotypes and demeaning jokes.

My mother helped whenever she could, but I knew that I needed to stand up for myself eventually. I suppose I felt like Pi did when he looked out into the ocean and burst into tears, realizing he had to stop dreaming about rescue and focus on survival. I became more confident and assertive about my beliefs, and I ended up losing many of my friends. I was a smart student, like Pi, but I felt like I didn't belong anywhere. Even when I went to visit my family in Pakistan, I was often ignored by most relatives, and some actively avoided me because I was raised as an American - a foreigner with a head full of wrong ideas. Thankfully, I could always rely on my grandparents to be there for me on those particular rough seas, as Pi did with his animal friends on the lifeboat.

I believe in one of the stated principles of Bapu Gandhi, an undoubtedly wise man: "All religions are true." I believe that God can be found in all things, no matter what the issue is. And yes, like Pi, "I just want to love God" and people too, because the first step to loving God is loving each other. This love is the source of everything good about faith; "No thundering from a pulpit, no condemnation from bad churches, no peer pressure, just a book of scripture quietly waiting to say hello, as gentle and powerful as a little girl's kiss on your cheek" (Martel 208). I most recently saw this demonstrated when I volunteered at a Pakistani hospital—SIUT—working with many poverty-stricken patients and families. So many of them were clearly people of faith, and found the means to be so happy in their lives, despite all their suffering. I especially remember the pure joy and hope in the music of an old, blind woman who would play the piano and sing for the children to keep them in good spirits, along with their many prayers and heartfelt thanks given to God.

Religion is not a conquering armada, but a lifeboat that keeps us afloat in the face of our own mortality. All religions provide believers with a creation story, rituals for daily life, and stories that allude to the depths of human nature. To Pi, and to anyone who believes in things that he cannot necessarily see nor prove, faith is a bridge between the coldness of fact and the warmth of emotion. The ability to believe in the unknowable is a hallmark of consciousness and awareness, one reason religions are so fiercely protected and so widely practiced. To believe in something makes us feel more alive, more connected to the world around us, giving structure to our understanding of the universe and our place in it in a way that pure science, based solely on observation, never can.

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I have managed to overcome my past sadness and bullying, and I am living a much better life—yes this story does have a happy ending. I was introduced to all three religions, and I believe that all of them are true. We should not point out the flaws and hypocrisies of each religion as the myopic religious leaders Pi encountered; however, we should find the good even in what we may think is inaccurate or bad. *Life of Pi* may not make you believe in God, it will make you believe in the power of faith—and of a literary work of fiction in exploring universal truths.

Thank you for writing an amazing book. Thank you for introducing me to Piscine Molitor Patel. This book has challenged me in some ways, but overall it has made me appreciate the nature of God and religion, as well as understand my own circumstances. I'm not at fault for being born into a society that is often unwilling to accept who I am, and the best I can do in this situation is simply to love God, like Pi did, and trust Him to show me His pure nature.

Sincerely,
Amina Khan

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