

## Wholesale God, Retail God

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A few years ago I read a wonderful novel by Canadian novelist, Yann Martel. The book is entitled, *The Life of Pi* and it tells the story of a young boy who grows up in India. During his teen years, he goes on a spiritual quest. He is a Hindu by birth and then discovers Christianity. He appreciates the Christian message of love. Then he discovers Islam and is impressed by it and “discovers a beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion.”<sup>i</sup>

So young Pi (short for Piscine) becomes devoted to all three religions, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. His parents do not know about his spiritual quest and one day the three of them are walking and are confronted by his three teachers whom Pi calls the wise men. Each teacher doesn't know, of course, that Pi is receiving instruction under both of the others. They all approach the family at once. Here is the text from the novel.

After the “Hellos” and the “Good days”, there was an awkward silence. The priest broke it when he said, with pride in his voice, “Piscine is a good Christian boy. I hope to see him join our choir soon.”

My parents, the pandit and imam looked surprised.

“You must be mistaken. He's a good Muslim boy. He comes without fail to Friday prayer, and his knowledge of the Holy Qur'an is coming along nicely.” So said the imam.

My parents, the priest and the pandit looked incredulous.

The pandit spoke. “You're both wrong. He's a good Hindu boy. I see him all the time at the temple coming for darshan and performing puja.”

My parents, the imam, and the priest looked astounded.

“There is no mistake,” said the priest. “I know this boy. His name is Piscine Molitor Patel and he’s a Christian.”

“I know him too, and I tell you he’s a Muslim,” asserted the imam.

“Nonsense!” cried the pandit. “Piscine was a born a Hindu, lives a Hindu and will die a Hindu!”

The three wise men stared at each other, breathless and disbelieving.

Lord, avert their eyes from me, I whispered in my soul. All eyes fell upon me.<sup>ii</sup>

It turns into a verbal brawl. The imam, pandit, and priest slur and slander each other about which religion is best and the only thing upon which they agree is that Pi must choose one. Back to the text:

The pandit spoke first, “Mr. Patel, Piscine’s piety is admirable. In these troubled times it’s good to see a boy so keen on God. We all agree on that.” The imam and priest nodded. “But he can’t be a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim. It’s impossible. He must choose.”

“I don’t think it’s a crime, but I suppose you’re right,” Father replied.

The three murmured agreement and looked heavenward, as did Father, whence they felt the decision must come. Mother looked at me.

A silence fell heavily on my shoulders.

“Hmmm, Piscine?” Mother nudged me. “How do you feel about the question?”

“Bapu Gandhi said, ‘All religions are true.’ I just want to love God,” I blurted out, and looked down, red in the face.

My embarrassment was contagious. No one said anything. It happened that we were not far from the statue of Gandhi on the esplanade. Stick in hand, an impish smile on his lips, a twinkle in his eyes, the Mahatma walked. I fancy that he heard our conversation, but that he paid even greater attention

to my heart. Father cleared his throat and said in a half-voice, "I suppose that's what we're all trying to do—love God."

I thought it very funny that he should say that, he who hadn't stepped into a temple with a serious intent since I had had the faculty of memory. But it seemed to do the trick. You can't reprimand a boy for wanting to love God. The three wise men pulled away with stiff, grudging smiles on their faces.

Father looked at me for a second, as if to speak, then thought better, said, "Ice cream, anyone?" and headed for the closest ice-cream wallah before we could answer. Mother gazed at me a little longer, with an expression that was both tender and perplexed.<sup>iii</sup>

That is an excerpt from *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. It is a memorable scene from a great story. Religious exclusivism or my religion is the true and correct one, and the others are false or even demonic needs to be dealt with by the church, in my view. Since this a Christian church, the place to begin is at home.

Last summer, I was talking with one of my daughter's friends. He is a young man about 20 or so. Knowing I am a minister, he told me why he doesn't attend church. His explanation went something like this.

"All the churches claim to be the true church. They condemn the other churches as false. They can't all be right. So they all must be wrong. I lost interest."

I remember thinking that very same thing for a long time. This mutual condemnation can be observed between Christian denominations and between Christians of the same denomination. The same is observed between religions as well.

How do we reconcile this? How can we appreciate the "truth" (if that is the correct word) of our own tradition as well as the truths of other traditions?

Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity* uses an image from merchandising. He first of all says that all religions point to something "more" than what we observe. There is more to the universe than meets the eye. The fascination with the more leads to religious belief and practice. Borg suggests that there is a reality to this more. This more is the wholesale

God. The specific religions sell various retail gods. It isn't that each one isn't true, it is just that they are packaged differently and sold in different outlet stores.

When I think of it this way, I can still practice my particular faith (for instance, I can purchase from my favorite retail outlet) knowing that even though my store looks very different from my neighbors' stores, we are purchasing, in essence, the same thing.

Matthew Fox says something similar with a different image in his book *One River, Many Wells*. Spiritual truth and vitality is a river that runs deep. The traditions are the wells that tap into that river. The wells are not the river. Yet we need the well to get to the river. Therefore, I don't have to stop going to my well. But I go with an awareness that others have wells that draw from the same river.

A third metaphor comes from Presbyterian minister, Dirk Ficca. He gave an insightful speech a few years ago, entitled, "Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a Diverse World."<sup>iv</sup> He spoke about pluralism. He used this metaphor:

Let me give you a beautiful pluralistic image. Imagine a holy place ringed with windows, and light is shining from outside this holy place through stained-glass windows into the holy place. Do you have that image in your mind? Well in this analogy, the light is the truth, the windows are religions, and the holy place is the world. Light shines from outside through the windows into the holy place in the same way religions are a vehicle by which truth comes into the world. If you take anything of what I say today, take this next thing. The window is not the light. The window is not the light. And religions need to be distinguished from the truth that they let into the world. Unfortunately, we spend a lot of time mistaking the window for the light and 99.9% of all religious conflict comes from that.

Rev. Ficca also said that pluralism is in itself not enough. He said that no one is really a pluralist. No one can be that objective to rise out of our own particularity. Pluralism is a process. It is a way of honesty and love that can help us make choices and honor the choices of others.

Pi in our novel, *The Life of Pi*, if we can imagine his future, will at some point make a choice and dig a deep well. He will in the end either choose

one or choose none. Because we cannot get beyond our particularity. But he (and we) can be enriched, deeply enriched, by that honest search and respect for all faiths, as he finds his home in one or the other.

I am a Christian. I am home in this tradition. That is my particularity. But I am a pluralist in the sense that I can love and honor and grow by loving others who follow other paths, even as I seek to be hospitable to others in my own.

I included the poem from the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians as our text this morning. Paul speaks about the importance of love. We see in a mirror dimly. Paul recognizes his own lack of objectivity. He writes: But then, face to face. Now I know only in part. Then I will know fully even as I am fully known. What do we do in the meantime? We hope, we have faith, and most importantly, we love.

We live with religious diversity. How we approach this diversity is the challenge. Diana Eck, a native of Bozeman, Montana is a professor at Harvard University. She is the head of the Pluralism Project. In a book she wrote a few years ago, she alerted me to something I had not realized. She wrote that the most religiously diverse country in the world is the United States. Diana Eck's book is entitled: *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian Country' Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation.*

Most Americans have no idea the extent of this diversity and the fact that it is just beginning. Eck believes that religious and cultural diversity will be one of the major social issues America will face this century.

There are six million Muslims, twice the number of Presbyterians. In our region, we have Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, many flavors of Christians, Earth-based practitioners, and many different kinds of spiritual seekers.

No longer do we have to go to Kyoto, Calcutta or Mecca to meet Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. We can find practitioners of these faiths and many others in such exotic places as Elizabethton and Johnson City.

Eck credits the explosion of this diversity in part to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, signed by President Lyndon Johnson, that ended

the racist immigration policy toward Asians. Our diversity is also due in a major way to our nation's creed, which is to protect and ensure the free exercise of religion.

The questions for America at this juncture are crucial ones. How will we treat our neighbors? Will we regard this rich religious diversity as a strength - a deep well of spiritual blessing? Will we regard religious diversity as a threat and a danger to "our way of life?"

As a Christian, my faith compels me to choose hospitality. How are we to respond to the alien, the foreigner and the sojourner in the land? With justice, kindness and mercy. We welcome the stranger and make her feel at home.

Why? Because at one time, we were strangers in the land.

In so doing, we may discover, as I have, that our faith will not be compromised by learning the wisdom from people who practice other religions. On the contrary, our faith and our nation will be enriched.

Diana Eck defined pluralism in four broad strokes:

- 1) **First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity.** Diversity is a given, but pluralism is a value. It is a process to learn, discover, and love.
- 2) **Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.** Try this experiment. After church this morning, when you are with someone with whom you are romantically inclined, in a moment of tenderness, tell this person with deep feeling, "I tolerate you." It just doesn't do it does it? Tolerance is certainly better than intolerance, but love is what it will take to make peace on Earth.
- 3) **Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*.** This goes to particularity. Yes, I am an American, a Tennessean, a Christian, and a Presbyterian. I cannot rise above my particularity, nor do I need or want to do so. But I can engage with others, bringing my commitments to the table and honoring others' commitments.
- 4) **Fourth, pluralism is based on dialogue.** Dialogue means that we speak and we listen. It does not mean that we slander or misrepresent

others. Dialogue is not saying that all Muslims are terrorists. It does not involve looking at the worst examples of others and comparing them to best examples of our own. In the words of the Apostle Paul: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* That is a long way from intolerance or mere tolerance.

We use that passage from Paul at weddings and commitments services. We use it for a couple who will be making a home together. The word for home or household in Greek is *oikos*. We get the word ecumenical from *oikos*. Diversity is a given. We share one house. That house is Earth. We cannot live in a house and be at war. It is time for the best of our religious and spiritual traditions to be ecumenical and to realize that we all live in one house, Earth. It is time to make a home in which we respect, honor, and love all people. That sounds simplistic and trite. But it ultimately, is the only way we will be able to live in the house. Coercion cannot make peace in a house. The harder path is dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

I am going to close with one more story. I have told this one to you before. But, following the example of my mother, who tells the good stories again and again until they become a part of us, I tell this good story.

At my first congregation in Lowville, New York, I made a friend from Pakistan who was a Jain. He was a doctor in town. Before I met him, I had never heard of Jainism even though it predates Christianity by 500 years. He liked to worship with us. He can worship anywhere he said. He married a Roman Catholic and they had a sacred space set up in their home. On the sacred space were statues and icons of his faith. There were also statues and icons of her faith.

He said with a big smile, "All of our gods get along wonderfully!"

Meaning, of course, so do they get along wonderfully.

I believe someday, that human beings will regard war as unnatural. We will come to awareness that we share one house, one Earth. That is my faith. That is my hope. In the meantime, I must love.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> P. 61

<sup>ii</sup> P. 66

<sup>iii</sup> P. 69

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/ficca\\_address.htm#diversity%20as%20conflict](http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/ficca_address.htm#diversity%20as%20conflict)