

Hope and
understanding:
comparing life of pi
and bless me, ultima



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In tough times, it seems that many people turn to their faith. In moments of weakness, when it seems that everything is lost, many people find that a certain hope remains in God. Others turn to God for a “ why”; a reason that circumstances are the way they are, or why God is putting them in such a difficult situation. In the novels *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolpho Anaya and *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, the protagonists Tony and Pi both have beliefs that give them something to turn to in hard times. The faith journeys of Pi and Tony are similar in that each boy finds mentors for the three faiths he identifies with; however, the main characters differ in how they understand the concept of one person possessing multiple faiths and in how they apply their faiths to the obstacles that they face in their lives.

Both of these adolescent boys are impressionable and malleable, and they both find mentors for their faiths that help shape and guide them in their beliefs. Pi, for one, identifies with Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Growing up in India where Hinduism is predominant, Pi was influenced by Hinduism from a young age. This is why he feels that he is Hindu. He explains that he has always felt a “ Presence,” and this seems to explain how he came into Hinduism: “ I am aware of Presence, not personal the way we usually feel presence, but something larger” (Martel, 28). Much as Pi grew up with Hinduism surrounding him, Tony grew up in Catholicism. Tony follows the model that his mother sets, and she is a mentor to him in this faith; his mother encourages him to practice Catechism and wants him to grow up to be a priest. Pi’s own second religion is Christianity, and Father Martin introduces him to this faith in his youth. Father Martin encourages him in this faith, and helps him to understand the basic idea of *The Story*. Tony’s second

faith is from Ultima, the ways of “ la cuaranderas.” Just as Pi feels a Presence, Tony feels a presence of his own as well: “ I had been aware of the awful presence of the river, which was the soul of the river, but through her I learned that my spirit shared in the spirit of all things” (Anaya, 15). Bringing to mind the idea of a spirit within the river, Ultima taught him about the spirits within plants. She tells Tony to speak to the plants before extracting them, and to tell them why they are being dug up. Finally, Pi’s mentor for his third religion, Islam, is Mr. Kumar, a Muslim baker. He introduces Pi to Islam after Pi watches him pray in his bakery. Tony’s own third faith is in the Golden Carp, a pagan god. His mentor who teaches him about the Golden Carp is his friend Samuel (in partnership with Cico), a boy who instructs Tony in the legends and ways of the Golden Carp. These various mentors help to teach these two young boys about the religions that they encounter.

A difference that is clearly evident between these two boys’ journeys is how Tony and Pi interpret faith and how they accept the practice of multiple faiths. Pi sees different religions simply as different channels to the same God, yet Tony finds that the contradictions between the faiths that he practices inhibit his ability to accept all of them at once. To begin with, Pi sees his three religions differently than others do. He has one intention: to love God. When the imam, pandit, and priest all visit Pi’s house inquiring about his faith, Pi simply tells them: “ Bapu Gandhi said, ‘ All religions are true.’ I just want to love God” (Martel, 39). Pi maintains that the three religions have distinct characteristics but all lead to the same God. Contrary to how Pi sees things, for the majority of the novel Tony is confused by religion, since he firmly believes in all three faiths but doesn’t see how they

can coexist. Cico further confuses Tony by telling him that he cannot have more than one God, because the Catholic God is a jealous God. At the end of the novel, Tony seems to have a better understanding of religion; "Take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp - and make it something new" (Anaya, 247). Even though it is difficult for him to see the three religions coming together, he sees how they all point to the same thing, which is a higher power. Tony ultimately realizes that he can worship however he chooses to, and that he does not need to conform to society. He realizes that he can create his own religion. This realization still differs from Pi's beliefs, though, in that Tony feels that if he is to possess multiple faiths, doing so requires the creation of an entirely new religion. Pi believes that multiple religions can remain separate and distinct, while still leading to the same God.

A further difference between the faith journeys of Pi and Tony can be seen in how Pi and Tony apply their unique religious beliefs to the challenges they face in their lives. They each face very different obstacles; Pi needs to survive, and Tony needs to mature. Yet they both use their faiths as resources as they go through tough times, in different ways. As Pi goes through his ordeal in his lifeboat, his goal is to survive and his faith is what keeps him going, even during his darkest days. At certain points his hope falters, as can be seen in the fading of orange (a color of Hinduism) on the lifeboat, and in the dead, decaying lamb. Yet in the end, Pi's faith is what brings him to land, and without it he would have died on the lifeboat. As for Tony, his obstacles accompany his journey of growing up. He is trying to understand his destiny, what the purpose of his life is, and his faiths play a

large role in that understanding. Some of the situations he goes through challenge his understanding of his purpose, such as the deaths of Florence, Narciso, and Lupito. These deaths cause Tony to question the differences between good and evil, and where the line lies for forgiveness and for condemnation by God. In a dream he has, he asks for forgiveness for Narciso, but not for Tenorio. God laughs and says to him, “ You would have a God who forgives all, but when it comes to your personal whims you seek punishment for your vengeance” (Anaya, 173). Furthermore, the problems presented by Tenorio and his daughters continue to provoke Tony’s questions. His faiths are a resource for him in that he turns to them for understanding of all these problems. Yet Tony finds that the many questions he has aren’t always answered in the way that he expects. In fact, he faces even more questions after his first communion, when he thought he would suddenly receive all of the answers he was looking for.

The novels *Bless Me*, *Ultima* and *Life of Pi* are ostensibly similar, but actually differ in multiple ways. Firstly, they are similar in that the novels are both about young boys who identify with multiple faiths, and who find mentors to help guide them through their spiritual journeys. Yet also prominent is the difference in how each boy understands the idea of possessing multiple faiths, and what that means for his life. Finally, they differ in the way that the characters use their faiths to overcome challenges in their lives: Pi uses his faith for hope in his ordeal on the lifeboat, and Tony for understanding as he grows up. These two novels showcase the importance of faith in difficult times, while emphasizing that people experience faith differently and have their own religious ideas. Turning to faith for hope in tough times, or for

understanding in confusing situations, is a common tactic of many people in the world. These two powerful ideas can be what bring people through tough times when, without faith in a higher power or purpose, it would be difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel.