

*dialog between Pi and Father Martin*

*Pi* That a god should put up with adversity, I could understand. The gods of Hinduism face their fair share of thieves, bullies, kidnappers and usurpers. What is the Ramayana but the account of one long, bad day for Rama? Adversity, yes. Reversals of fortune, yes. Treachery, yes. But *humiliation? Death? I* couldn't imagine Lord Krishna consenting to be stripped naked, whipped, mocked, dragged through the streets and, to top it off, crucified – and at the hands of mere humans, to boot. I'd never heard of a Hindu god dying. Brahman Revealed did not go for death. Devils and monsters did, as did mortals, by the thousands and millions – that's what they were there for. Matter, too, fell away. But divinity should not be blighted by death. It's wrong. The world soul cannot die, even in one contained part of it. It was wrong of this Christian God to let His avatar die. That is tantamount to letting a part of Himself die. For if the Son is to die, it cannot be fake. If God on the Cross is God shamming a human tragedy, it turns the Passion of Christ into the Farce of Christ. The death of the Son must be real. Father Martin assured me that it was. But once a dead God, always a dead God, even resurrected. The Son must have the taste of death forever in His mouth. The Trinity must be tainted by it; there must be a certain stench at the right hand of God the Father. The horror must be real. Why would God wish that upon Himself? Why not leave death to the mortals? Why make dirty what is beautiful, spoil what is perfect?

*Father Martin* Love.

*Pi* And what about this Son's deportment? There is the story of baby Krishna, wrongly accused by his friends of eating a bit of dirt. His foster mother, Yashoda, comes up to him with a wagging finger. "You shouldn't eat dirt, you naughty boy," she scolds him. "But I haven't," says the unchallenged lord of all and everything, in sport disguised as a frightened human child. "Tut! Tut! Open your mouth," orders Yashoda. Krishna does as he is told. He opens his mouth. Yashoda gasps. She sees in Krishna's mouth the whole complete entire timeless universe, all the stars and planets of space and the distance between them, all the lands and seas of the earth and the life in them; she sees all the days of yesterday and all the days of tomorrow; she sees all ideas and all emotions, all pity and all hope, and the three strands of matter; not a

pebble, candle, creature, village or galaxy is missing, including herself and every bit of dirt in its truthful place. “My Lord, you can close your mouth,” she says reverently. There is the story of Vishnu incarnated as Vamana the dwarf. He asks of demon king Bali only as much land as he can cover in three strides. Bali laughs at this runt of a suitor and his puny request. He consents. Immediately Vishnu takes on his full cosmic size. With one stride he covers the earth, with the second the heavens, and with the third he boots Bali into the netherworld.

Even Rama, that most human of avatars, who had to be reminded of his divinity when he grew long-faced over the struggle to get Sita, his wife, back from Ravana, evil king of Lanka, was no slouch. No spindly cross would have kept him down. When push came to shove, he transcended his limited human frame with strength no man could have and weapons no man could handle.

That is God as God should be. With shine and power and might. Such as can rescue and save and put down evil.

This Son, on the other hand, 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 a god is that? It's a god on too human a scale, that's what. There are miracles, yes, mostly of a medical nature, a few to satisfy hungry stomachs; at best a storm is tempered, water is briefly walked upon. If that is magic, it is minor magic, on the order of card tricks. Any Hindu god can do a hundred times better. This Son is a god who spent most of His time telling stories, *talking*. This Son is a god who walked, a pedestrian god – and in a hot place, at that – with a stride like any human stride, the sandal reaching just above the rocks along the way; and when He splurged on transportation, it was a regular donkey. This Son is a god who died in three hours, with moans, gasps and laments. What kind of a god is that? What is there to inspire in this Son?

*Father Martin* Love.

*Pi* And this Son appears only once, long ago, far away? Among an obscure tribe in a backwater of West Asia on the confines of a longvanished empire? Is done away with before He has a single grey hair on His head? Leaves not a single descendant, only scattered, partial testimony, His complete works doodles in the dirt? Wait a minute. This is more than Brahman with a serious case of stage fright. This is Brahman

selfish. This is Brahman ungenerous and unfair. This is Brahman practically unmanifest. If Brahman is to have only one son, He must be as abundant as Krishna with the milkmaids, no? What could justify such divine stinginess?

*Father Martin* Love.

*Pi* I'll stick to my Krishna, thank you very much. I find his divinity utterly compelling. You can keep your sweaty, chatty Son to yourself.

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That was how I met that troublesome rabbi of long ago: with disbelief and annoyance. I had tea with Father Martin three days in a row. Each time, as teacup rattled against saucer, as spoon tinkled against edge of cup, I asked questions.

*The answer was always the same.*