

AN ANCIENT TEMPLE TO TOLERANCE

BY MERRITT Y. HUGHES

PRIEST-KINGS and god-emperors are not usually regarded as prophets of religious toleration. Traditionally, the Roman emperors, "as a class," have been best known to fame as persecutors of the early Church and they have suffered double condemnation because the two idealists among them, Marcus Aurelius and Julian the Apostate, both sanctioned the choice between the divine Caesar and the divine Jesus by the death penalty. During the past century both men have won a little sympathy as romantic martyrs to the spirit of dying paganism, but the tide of modern sentiment has not really turned in their favor. Swinburne and Ibsen both failed to make a sympathetic figure of Julian, and Marcus Aurelius is as splendidly aloof from the modern world as he was from his own. Probably with much justice and common sense, we refuse to become partisans of those who staked everything on the defence of the abstract past against the living present and the future.

Intellectually at least, there was a quintessential kind of tolerance possible for a Roman emperor which was infinitely more profound than our modern tolerance of spiritual live and let live. Imagine a man bringing to the purple strong religious instincts accentuated by a dash of superstition and cultivated by wide, though superficial reading of ancient philosophy. Give him the curiosity and intelligence of a modern student of comparative religion. Suppose him free to travel everywhere through the Roman world during twenty years of almost unbroken peace and think of him as dominated by a desire to solve the problem of government with a religious formula. Such a man was Hadrian and in his villa near Tivoli we have the ruins of a vast shrine which he erected to his own passion for combining into a single personal experience all the living religious faith, both traditional and philosophical, which he had found in his journeys through the Empire.

Hadrian's journeys around the rim of the Roman world undoubtedly were sentimental. There is proof enough of that in the familiar story of Antinous, the beautiful Greek boy whom he discovered in Syria and made his favorite page, and in whose honor he founded Antinoopolis on the Nile, at the point where the youth was drowned. But Hadrian was as shrewd as he was spontaneous in his sentimentality. He understood the Greeks whom he had to govern, and, if he shared their weaknesses, he won their affection. Three times he went to the Near East in the eighteen years after he became Emperor in 119 A. D., and each time hundreds of coins were struck in his honor by the towns through which he passed, all wishing *Good Luck to Augustus*. Far out on the Parthian frontier he held a durbar, after the manner of the Princes of Wales in India, and the independent, barbarian kings from the desert came to meet him at such a feast of sentimental hypocrisy as only those of us who were in Paris during the Armistice can imagine. Yet he somehow managed to reach an understanding with them which kept the peace in the East for the better part of a century.

Like the present Prince of Wales, Hadrian seemed to find that the art of government was best understood as a perpetual pleasure journey, a journey, that is, which gave pleasure to other people. He was near Antioch when he became, rather unexpectedly, Emperor. He went straight to Rome, and no sooner was acknowledged there than he left for Britain by way of the Roman frontiers in Germany and Holland. He was away on a three-year tour which included France, Spain, Morocco and Asia before he saw Rome again. As a pleasure journey the trip had limitations for all concerned. One Roman gentleman whom he invited to go along as a travelling companion refused its hardships in a famous quatrain which has been translated—without the apologies due to the author of *Hiawatha*—in this way:

“I would rather not be Caesar,
Have to haunt Batavian marshes,
Lurk about among the Britons,
Feel the Scythian frost assail me.”

The Travels with a Donkey would be much less admired by most of its readers if its story had to be lived instead of read, and it would be interesting to know how the little, middle-aged man of genius walking bare-headed under a private soldier's kit in the cold of Germany or the heat of Egypt really felt about it all. Unfortunately,

he did not leave any record of his sensations, except the big villa on the edge of the Roman Campagna below Tivoli.

The villa is a log-book, the biggest ever kept and absolutely unique. Hadrian began it when he had returned from his second big swing around the imperial circle and it was building during his last great "pleasure journey." It is rather a begging of the question to dispose of all his travels under that name, but both his German and English biographers, Gregorovius and B. W. Henderson, do so. The name does better justice to the spirit with which he bore their hardships than it does to his objects in taking them. On that last expedition he travelled through Syria and Arabia. He went far down the Euphrates and up the Nile. From Antioch and Palmyra and Alexandria he sent back the specifications of his finest adventures in architecture and scenery to be built into the mighty pleasure dome decreed at Tibur. His idea in doing so bears comparison with our world's fairs, or perhaps better with the Imperial Exhibition at Wembley, or with the beautiful exposition which united the Spanish world at Seville, for Hadrian was a courageous liberal about race and colonial problems and he tried to wipe out all the discriminations to the prejudice of the Roman provinces in comparison with Italy. In one respect his villa resembled the Missionary Exposition at the Vatican this year, for it assembled temples of most of the religions of the Roman world. To be sure, it was not dedicated to the conquest of the religions represented, but it subtly symbolized the absorption of them all into the cult of the Emperor, the super-religion of the Roman state.

The temples to the Eastern gods are the most mysterious things about Hadrian's villa, just because they are such starkly clear proofs of the difference between the Roman world and our own which we find it hardest to grasp. A man who claimed divine honors from his subjects and got them, a man to whom statues were erected in every city in the world so that the trade in them was standardized over the whole Mediterranean basin, surrounded himself with temples to all the gods whose cults were popular anywhere in the Roman world. It was not that he wished to hob-nob with his fellow gods. He was not crazy, like Alexander, who went out to the temple of Ammon near Thebes, and came back with a revelation of son-ship to Zeus and took divine honors to himself ever after. Hadrian took pleasure in insisting unceremoniously that he was a man. When he was at Thebes he seems to have gone into the desert at sunrise to see the musical statue of Jupiter-Ammon quite as a

modern tourist or scientist would go. Or would it be nearer the truth to say that he went in the spirit of a pilgrim, a theosophical pilgrim with curiosity and respect for religious ideas of any kind wherever they were definite and intense enough to have embodied themselves in a ritual? We have no name for this kind of thing in the modern world. We call it Tolerance, as if a world of mere negation could describe a lifelong passion. With feeble imaginations we feel toward it in our science of comparative religions. But the truth is that we do not understand it and probably have no room for it. Our modern missionary movements, and the conception of colonization now put in action by all western nations except the French are founded upon interests and ideas of which it was a sheer denial. Probably the only poet in the English-speaking world spontaneously creating anything akin in spirit to Hadrian's temples to the gods of the gorgeous but superstitious East, is Vachel Lindsay. Lindsay has imagined glorious fanes to be built by all the Christian denominations living together in unity in Springfield, Illinois, a hundred years from now. What a timid amateur in synthesizing piety the American would seem to the Roman!

Realistic historians such as Signor Ferrero may be right in suggesting that Hadrian, like Aurelian who tried to unify the Roman world on a basis of Mithraism, and like Constantine, who actually did unify it on a basis of Christianity, was only making political experiments in religion. No doubt, that is part of the truth about his character, but it does not explain his enthusiasm or his touch of genius. No one could build Hadrian's replica of the shrine in which the mysteries were celebrated at Alexandrian Canopus—crude though the building may have been—without a fragment of that creative fusion of the religious and architectural passion embodied in the twentieth century in Mr. Cram. Hadrian was a serious dilettante in religions, and from that, in his times, it was only a step to such natures as those of Apollonius of Tyana and of Plutarch who honestly tried to make a synthesis of all the religious traditions around them for the salvation of people intelligent enough to understand them.

Only a fragment of the tufa core of the Canopus temple is left at Tibur. The shell of stone and the main mass of the building are gone. But enough remains to certify that Hadrian had caught the essential thing in the colossal architecture of Egypt and to suggest that he may have given its illusion as successfully as he gave the much more difficult illusion of vastness in the dome of the Pan-

theon. The story is that he had a little reproduction of the town of Canopus built around the shrine for the Mysteries. It was all self-contained and lay in a little valley out of sight of the rest of the villa. There the gossip of Rome said that the Emperor participated in rites too magnificent and sensual for western imaginations to conceive. Certainly the city can have had small part in the dreams that he cultivated in his little Egypt.

Rome was not really shut out of the villa at Tibur. The city lay on the horizon, and inside the Cyclopean walls of the park three thousand of the Praetorian Guards had quarters. Six or seven thousand people in all lived with the Emperor and the spirit of the place must have been as little as possible like that of Louis XIV's Versailles. It was a model city as much as it was a villa, and as such it was perhaps most truly the expression of Hadrian's personality. He had spent his life in founding cities—Adrianople, Antinoopolis on the Nile, Aelia on the Black Sea, and scores of others. He had never lost interest in rebuilding dilapidated Athens. At Tibur he would build a city for himself. If it did not have its roots in the economic life of the Empire, it would at least be a less dangerous parasite than Caprae in the ancient world, or than Coney Island today. And it would be beautiful. Of that he was sure, for he intended to make it out of copies of some of the loveliest buildings that he had seen on his travels. So he seems to have tried to give the effect of having lifted Athens bodily from Greece to Italy. A Lyceum, an Academy, a Prytaneum and a Painted Colonnade were all parts of the main unit of building in the villa. For the most part, only the floors and the stumps of the pillars in the great cloisters are left, but they are proof that there was no crowding. Every building stood free, and almost every building must have had its individual level among the rolling foothills of the Apennines where Hadrian—thinking of the clear definition of the temples on the Acropolis—had chosen his site.

We should do Hadrian no injustice if we compared his villa to some of the famous literary Utopias, best of all with Plato's *Republic*. He may not have been a Platonist, but the villa was a philosopher's paradise, and no better short definition than that could be invented for all the Utopias which have ever been described. There is just enough left of the roll in the villa which is called traditionally "the Hall of the Philosophers" to assure the visitor that the roof of the colonnade was high enough to give a pleasant resonance to a confident speaker's voice, and that the space was just big

enough to accommodate that fit audience—few, but not too few—which Protagoras and all his children love.

Around the great circular portico the life of the villa must have centered and the baths, the basilica and the distant Greek theatre must have been foils for the unmitigated play of conversation that went on there. Just above the portico one niched wall of the library still stands. The room was big enough to contain all the books of value in Greek and Latin literature, but, however rich it may have been, it must have been too dark to invite much reading indoors. Readers must have taken the rolls into the gardens and porticos to scan them and talk about them in a setting marvellously like that world half of livid reality and half of bright imagination in which the Platonic Socrates talked over books and the men who presumed to write them.

Superficially, to a modern visitor, the villa seems like a sheer caprice, an abuse of the tyranny that gave unlimited slave labor to one man. How little a mere caprice it really was, and how closely linked it was with the most humane ideas of the ancient world, will appear in an instant if it is compared with the little Versailles with which a King of Bavaria amused himself not many years ago, or with the pleasure parks built by the two rich men of the English "Romantic Revolt," Horace Walpole and Beckford. Strawberry Hill and Fonthill Abbey were both exaggerated efforts to escape from life. Poe, in *The Domain of Arnheim*, distilled the essence of those efforts in landscape gardening of his English predecessors. A man to whom, by a chance which Poe did not very convincingly explain, the control of all the capital in the world fell, built a park of vast extent and of perfect beauty, but furnished with only a single building, the palace of the owner. Park and palace were so imagined that only a single individual could enjoy them. A house party there would be inconceivable, even to Mr. Shaw. They were the projection of a fancy much more individualistic than artistic. Poe barricaded his imaginary paradise against all but a few visitors, just as Beckford morbidly excluded almost all visitors from Fonthill. Hadrian's villa may have been as full of caprices as Horace Walpole's Gothic mansion, but it was something altogether different. Its builder had lived in extraordinarily active contact with men and ideas and it contained as much of his world as he could crowd into it. If the author of *Vathek* had been in Rome, Hadrian would have invited him to Tibur and installed him in the role of

Rhadamanthus in the little Tartarus which reminded guests at the villa that their host was an adept of the Mysteries of Eleusis.

In the Sibylline Books there was a prophecy in which many of his contemporaries saw Hadrian intended. It said that a king with a brow of silver, who bore the name of a sea, would build temples and altars in every city, would travel through the world on foot, and would understand all magic mysteries. As the *journal intime* of that messianic king, kept in landscape and architecture, the villa at Tibur, in spite of its dilapidations, is alive with meaning.