

## IN PRAISE OF HEATHENISM

BY LILY STRICKLAND ANDERSON

MUCH has been spoken and written about the difficulties of Christianizing the so-called heathen. One who has lived for any considerable time in the East, comes to have serious doubts as to the desirability of doing so, even if it were possible.

The Indian's religion is as much of a necessity to his nature and environment as his dark skin is a necessity to him for a protection against the tropic heat in which he lives and dies. It would be as cruel and incongruous to deprive the emotional, superstitious and abnormally devout Oriental of his natural religion, and impose Christianity upon him, as it would be to remove his dark skin and replace it with a white one.

Fully ninety per cent of the inhabitants of India are "children of the soil and sun," and live such simple, happy and pastoral lives, that it would be tragic, if not criminal, to substitute for their satisfying philosophy, the perplexities fostered by abstruse conceptions of convictions of sin; of repentance; conversion, and entire sanctification.

At dawn, the humble Indian farmer goes out to till the paddy-fields that give him sustenance; he hears the matutinal songs of tropic birds; he smells the subtle and intoxicating breath of upturned loam; he feels the caress of fresh winds on his cheek, cooling the sweat of his labor. His simple fare is a feast, for he has earned his daily bread. He bathes his wholesome weary body in some lilled pool, and seeks the companionship of his little family, finding in them his comfort and recompense.

Perhaps his home is only a mud and palm thatched hut, but it gives him shelter, and he built it with his own hands. The wild gourd beautifies the tawny thatch and opens its golden blossoms in the sun. Nature, ever bountiful in the East, gives him of her fruits; he has only to go out and gather plantains, mangoes, pappas, pine-

apples, coconuts, custard-apples, and dates. He need never starve.

And when he has eaten and quenched his thirst from a brass lotah, his hookah is waiting to give him dreams. Should he desire more, his drum and reed-flute await but a touch to give him the solace of thoughts expressed only in music.

On festivals and feast-days, he dons his gala attire, expressed in some gay turban or colorful necklace; and goes to the village fair. He is not critical of the entertainments offered him. He witnesses a nautch, and becomes lost in the rhythmic measures of the weird and eager music; he watches the antics of trained bears, monkeys and goats, and laughs with the frank abandonment of a child; he succumbs to the hypnotic spell of a snake-charmer and his gourd-flute, and perhaps winds up the day in the extravagant purchase of a new household god made of mud and painted in gaudy colors. He is a child of the sun, and loves all brilliant expressions of life, and the audible demonstrations of sensuous enjoyment natural to a nature of inherited primitive emotions.

The Indian peasant, who is called heathen, has superlative compensations in the very simplicity of his life. First of all, he has a good digestion. His daily menu may be the unvaried diet of curry and rice, embellished by an occasional feast of fish, goat's flesh and sweet-meats; but he does not find his food monotonous. Monotony is merely the consciousness of monotony.

The simple ryot, or farmer, in this land knows nought of sanitation, microbia, materia-medica, monthly bills, income taxes, "politics, corruption and bribery"; nought of Christian Science, Rotarianism, or the Higher Learning. What blessed mental freedom is his! Our peasant's needs are few, and his ambitions fewer. His material life is dominated by several desires that influence him to thrift. First, that he may keep free from the clutching fingers of the Userer, usually a rascally Kabuli who earns a fine living by lending small amounts of money at exorbitant interest; and secondly, that he may be able to save the necessary dowry to marry off his female children; and thirdly, that he may be able to have a decent burial with all the orthodox last "Shraddah" rites so important to his caste.

He must go to the Burning-ghat in a manner becoming to a good Hindu; he must have a proper funeral cloth; ghee for his body; mourners to accompany his bier to the place of burning; faggots to make the pyre, and all the ceremonials that are in accordance with his faith. He is fortunate indeed if he have a son whose duty

it is to liberate his soul by striking his skull with a stick as he lies on the pyre awaiting dissolution in the flames.

In life he requires little; in death less. Man as an organism needs only light, air, heat and food. Luxuries are added according to his degree of civilization, his customs or his geographical location. The more primitive a man, the fewer his needs, especially if he lives in the Tropics; and this applies to his spiritual as well as physical mechanism.

Normality implies a natural functioning of Nature's forces. My Indian peasant is a normal man. Normality frequently changes in inverse ratio to civilization's progress; that is, a man who has become complex as a creature of inherited standards, requires more that is non-essential.

The Indian is happy in his religion. Perhaps it is better to be a good Hindu, and worship a little mud god, than to be a civilized Laodicean. Positiveness, whether applied to right or wrong, is more admirable than negativeness. Strong sinners have more to offer than weak saints, for they lived more fully. And, by a strange paradox, the scholar or philosopher who accepts a First Cause or Divine Intelligence, and excludes the entire system of theology, is only returning, after all, to the condition that the sun worshippers had reached thousands of years before Christianity was dreamed of.

Our Indian farmer, who spends his life in vital contact with the soil, has perhaps acquired and absorbed into his soul, the same natural and primitive energies that are manifested in Nature. His truths are gleaned from realities, not artificialities. It was Whitman who said:

"Now I can see the secret of making the best people;

It is to grow in the open air, and eat and sleep with the earth."

Nature, in the East, is spontaneous, vigorous, aggressive and fecund; and the peasant who wrests his living from the soil, deserves at least to live his own life as he sees fit, free from outside interference. He is content with so little. Why not leave him in undisturbed possession of his happiness?

The civilized man is enmeshed in a web of infinitesimal complexities; he is enslaved by the minutae of life, and bound on the wheel of trivial traditions; stripped of all the glories that were his when he was but a Pagan and a heathen. And more recently, he has been vexed with the useless controversies of fundamentalism and evolution.

Our Indian is proud of his religion, not ashamed of it. Have you ever gotten down on your knees at sunset and faced Mecca, and called on "Allah the Compassionate"? Have you ever known, in the public acknowledgement of your religion, such a lack of self-consciousness?

Which of us, through meditation on Nirvana, contemplating with the Third Eye of Inward Wisdom, may attain to the blissful peace that absorbs the soul of a devout Buddhist?

Which of us has followed a joyous processional of colored gods to the river, and sung with all our hearts the chants to Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva or any other God having the attributes of the One great God, the Creator?

The greatest obstacle to overcome, in converting the heathen, is his indomitable and unquestioning faith in his own gods. And we resent a quality in others that we so lack in ourselves. Whether it is the Koran, the Chronicals of Buddha, the Shastas, the Book of Zoroaster or the Ethics of Confucius; are they not all found in wisdom? Are the laws of the Eightfold Path valueless because they were not prophesied in the Old and fulfilled in the New Testament? Because a man is a heathen, it does not follow that he is a sinner. On the contrary, his very lack of sin-consciousness, keeps from real sin. What should the passionate children of the Sun know of negative and bloodless virtue, or the inhibition of natural impulses? God gave them their senses to enjoy, not to atrophy. There are no emasculate saints in the Indian calendar. A philosopher has wisely said that man makes God in his own image. If that be true, what use have the Eastern heathens for the white man's God?

Here, as elsewhere, the attempt to enforce negations has only succeeded in creating new desires. One merely becomes more adept in cunning and the means of satisfying secret thirsts. The Bengal peasant who has escaped this process of Christianization is the happiest of the lot.

The heathen enjoys his religion in his daily life; we as Christians, usually reserve Sunday for a demonstration of our faith. On "the Lord's day," we go to church, smugly place our tithe, or less, in the collection plate; resolutely turn our faces, if not our ears, towards the pulpit from whence flows a turgid and interminable stream of words. We even go so far as to join in singing hymns of bad poetry and worse music. We smile unctiously as we leave the house of God, and shake our brother by the hand, feeling full of

good works. We do our duty, and keep the Sabbath, for verily, we are God-fearing people.

The religious man, or Christian, makes a virtue of his own impotence, and in his heart envies the cheerful sinner who breaks the commandments openly and unashamed. Even a philosopher can defy conventions and moralize about them afterwards, but a Christian is afraid to be happy. He is too cowardly to scoff openly at negations. He is not clever enough to sin and not be found out. Outcasts are those who have failed to sin intelligently. The Christian does not sin, because he fears the consequence of sin, not because he would not enjoy sinning. And so he is frequently a hypocritical and insincere charlatan who has not even the virtue of honest convictions.

The heathen is not hypocritical in his religion; he is, above all things, sincere and earnest.

The Christian religion lacks unity and harmony, and is split by dissension and discord. What wonder, then, that all this mean confusion and conflict should bewilder the simple heathen! Are we, as Christians, and members of this imperfect organization, a fit people to take on ourselves the conversions of the heathen?

Our Indian heathen intercedes directly with his own God; he does not need an intermediary. The self-appointed mouthpieces of divinity, in the form of unctious preachers, take up collections for "foreign missions," and blandly patronize the children of the sun across the seas. They condescend from their heights of spurious culture to seriously consider the question of converting the heathen. The heathen does not want to be converted; he only asks to sit in the sun, and be free. The reformer is always first the meddler.

Morals may be taught by rote. They may even be obeyed to the letter; but the spirit in which true morality lives must be instinctive, and cannot be inculcated by pedagogues. If a man is as he thinks in his heart, what use was Moses as a legislator? Did the "stone mason of Sinai" change the natures of the children of Israel when he brought down the tablets of the Decalogue from the mountain? Moses was faced with the same situation that the modern reformer meets today. His charges were enjoying themselves too well; so he conceived the idea of frightening his naughty children into being good, and hurled down his wrath in mighty negations; in threats of pain and punishments.

Our evangelist of today tells his congregation that they must be "convicted of sin and repent." Our heathen, having no knowledge

of sin, has no sin to repent of. He is not the victim of over-wrought nerves, emotions and hysteria.

The lordly and highly civilized white man, with an almost divine insolence, sends out his missionaries into the wild places of the earth who seek to change a primitive people without understanding them. They put "mother hubbards" on beautiful brown bodies; they teach meaningless hymns and take away the joys of pagan melody; they make the heathen conscious of sin and nakedness and evil, and tell them of the serpent of wicked wisdom. In other words, they run them out of Eden with the flaming sword of negations.

Those few Indians in whom the seeds of Christianity have been sown, have proved indeed rocky soil. The majority of converts are drawn from the very lowest classes; the low caste and out caste of the country, the sweepers, doms and pariahs. Once an Indian confesses Christianity, he is immediately outcasted by his orthodox Hindu brothers, and made the butt of contumely and ridicule. Unable to continue in their old occupations, the converts usually seek service in the households of Christian families; and thus most of the Christian's servants here are drawn from the riff-raff of India, excellent material for thieves, liars and rascals. We ourselves as Christians, are on a par with these outcasts to the orthodox Hindu; we are unclean eaters of cow's and swine's flesh.

It may not be inappropriate just here, to mention some of the drawbacks of keeping Christian Indians in one's service in India. We have learned that it is far better to eschew the Christianized native and stick to the heathen in our domestic establishments. Before we had been enlightened by personal experience, and learned that the Christian Indian "was not," we were the victims of wholesale robberies, deceits and lies. Our properties were stolen; our pantry and "cellarette" depleted of food and liquids by Christian servants; and on the whole, we found them a whining, contemptible and avaricious lot. Now, whenever we need a new servant, should the applicant begin with the formula, "I very good Christian, Sahib, I go to church and pray"—he gets no further in his declaration of virtue, but is told in no uncertain tones, to "Jehanna mi jaldi jao," which is the Hindustani equivalent for "Get to H—— out of here!" Now we are happily surrounded by a small army of faithful and efficient servants; Sikhs, Mohammedans, and Hindus. Heathens all!

The bare and drab garments of Protestantism offer very little in exchange for the colorful cloak of heathenism. Catholicism has been more successful in the missionary field here in India, principally

because the step from Heathenism to Catholicism is not so great as the step from Heathenism to Protestantism. Catholic churches have a much stronger appeal to the heathen than the bare and barn-like edifices of the Protestant. Waving aside the question of the Trinity, Catholic churches offer almost as great a variety of graven images as the Hindu Temples. Both church and Temple have the smell of incense and flowers; both candles, bells, music and colors calculated to please the heathen eye. The canny Fathers have sometimes even gone so far as to present in icognography, the Holy Family as dark-skinned Easterners dressed in the garments of the East. But is this idea far-fetched after all? There is not much difference in the complexions of Nazarenes and Indians.

The Protestant missionary's plan of religion is not a happy one. It savors too much of the methods of the Inquisition, a Christian and outstanding monument to Intolerance. A creed or dogma cut to a narrow cloth and offered with the alternative of accepting it or being eternally damned, is infinitely more cruel and barbarous than anything Heathens could conceive of. For, to an intelligent being, it is incredible to imagine that to every handful of people saved, there are millions damned. This is the main plank in the platform of orthodox Christianity that should be removed before one attempts to convert the heathen.

I have discussed this subject personally with many educated Indians, and they unanimously say, "Why should the West send us missionaries? We do not want them. Our religion is thousands of years older than theirs; we were civilized when they were savages."

"Winning souls to Christ," is a phrase often heard on the lips of sanctified egotists who take all the credit of conversions to themselves. They prate about hell's fire and the everlasting torments of the damned, objectifying in Dorean imagery an ultimatum that only affects the weak-minded and timid. Fear, induced by hysteria, is the door through which they would have men seek salvation. If their pictures of hell are graphic and horrible, their interpretations of heaven are, to some of us, equally revolting. Yet, to the evangelist, the sine qua non of salvation is faith in the reality of both of these impossible descriptions, as well as a literal acceptance of the allegories of the Bible. The average revivalist is seldom intelligent enough to have studied, for purposes of comparison if nothing more, some, or all of the twenty Bibles of the world that exist beside his own. He has not considered the value of Mohammed,

Buddha, Zoroaster, Brahma, or even Confucius and Lo Tze, as great teachers inspired to benefit humanity. He, as a Christian, belongs to the army of the world's greatest snobs.

Our simple Heathen knows little of proselytism and cares less. If he had a slogan, it would probably be "live, and let live." The Indian peasant is, as we have said, happy and contented in his religion. He has infinite variety and amusements in it, offered by at least thirty-six definite religious festivals annually which serve to brighten the otherwise drab routine of his daily life. One might say that the Indian lives in anticipation of holidays to come, and that his conversation is largely flavored with retrospective comments on past festivals and anticipatory plans for future festivals. On these colorful occasions, he throws himself whole-heartedly into participation in ceremonials, processions, feasts, and the various phases of his religious festivals. His life is filled with the brilliant pageantry of religious observances, and his spiritual needs are satisfied. He is brought up on the songs and stories of the mythology of his people; and, if he is educated, he will readily admit that the Pantheon, with its infinite variety of Gods, Goddesses, and demi-gods; and the extravagant embroidery of its mythological concepts, are merely allegorical or legendary expressions, in varied forms, of the One God-head, or Brahma; and are all intended to personify some definite quality or attribute of divinity. This romantic and poetic system of colorful Deities dwelling in the Himalayan fastness of Mt. Meru, meets the needs of imaginative minds, and satisfies something within their natures.

The Christian of today has come to be more and more discontented with his religion. It does not satisfy. While he has grown, the church has remained static. If a man is burning with convictions larger than the dogmas of his church, and makes so bold as to honestly declare his attitude, he is branded as an heretic and put out of the church. It is largely a cowardly and sheep-like attitude of mind that keeps the church pews filled on the Sundays of today. Most men had rather jog along in the comfortable ruts of inherited traditions than to come out in the open and draw the limelight of criticism upon themselves by being honest and sincere.

The bare and cold churches of Protestantism offer nothing in the way of sensuous appeal. The almost oriental ritualism of the Catholic church, its forms and panoply satisfies men's deeply-rooted love of emotional appeal. On the whole Protestantism is a soul-less thing in comparison.

The Pantheon of the Hindu is filled with real and human personalities, brought near to the heart by their very weaknesses and sublimated vices. Krishna, the ideal God of the Hindu, tells of his dalliance with the sixteen thousand Gopia, or celestial milkmaids on the fields of Brindaban. Most of the sacred books of the East are filled with the amatory episodes of the Gods and Goddesses. Do not these human qualities endear them to their followers? What use have they for a Mosaic Jehovah, a Being infinitely cruel, vengeful and jealous? They might fear, but never love such a God.

The religion of the Indian heathen is a mediate thing. "God is in his house," in the concrete form of many household deities. The system of Polytheism offers the consolation of a separate God for every need; and yet, to the cultured Hindu, all these Gods are but the symbolical representations of the One, Brahma, the Creator.

The Indian has made "holy" an infinite number of natural objects. Certain animals are supposed to represent the symbols of divinity, as for instance, the cow, the bull, the monkey, cobra and peacock. Rivers are sacred, especially the Ganges and her tributary streams. To bathe in these waters is to be cleansed spiritually as well as physically. Ablution, in India, has acquired a religious significance, and is practised every day by all orthodox Hindus, as an essential rite. "Mother Ganga," or the Ganges, is supposed to contain within herself the divine attributes of purification; even the dead are dipped into her water before they are placed on the funeral pyre. Perhaps the Protestant Christian methods of baptism arose from this immemorial practice in India.

Shiva, in his office as generator, is symbolized all over the broad face of India in the stone lignam. Certain trees have divine attributes, such as the banyan, the bael, the neem and the pipal, "fiscus religioso," or Bo-tree. Even plants have a religious significance. The soma plant is frequently mentioned in the Rig Veda and many later works; the tulsi, basil, darbha, lotus, datura, red rose, cactus, euphorbis, jasmine, bel, and many other plants and flowers are associated with the various members of the Hindu Pantheon.

Sandal-wood, coconut and mustard oil; betel, saffron and rice are used in connection with the rites of worship and sacrifice. In other words, the vegetable kingdom is intimately associated with the functions of religious worship.

In the earlier forms of the Hindu religion, trees, caves, rivers and mountains were supposed to be the dwelling places of good and evil spirits, and came to have a religious significance in their theol-

ogy. The crigin of their recognition as important factors in religion, goes back to the early days of Animism and Fetishism, and persists today in India, in all religions. God speaks through the voice of nature, and her products, aside from giving life, are used in the religious ceremonials, without which no Indian's life is complete.

The Christian has no such compensations in Nature as allied with Gods or Trinities. His system is vague, and intangible. Where is God? What is He? Can we bring Him down and make Him real? What does a Christian mean when he speaks of a "personal knowledge of Jesus Christ"?

The Indian's religion is satisfying because he adopts so much of his everyday life into his heart and his theology. His mind is filled with the enigmatic and indescribable symbols of his objectified desires and fears; and he uses the things he sees in Nature as his talismans. By this means his life is enriched and made poetical and romantic, even if he does not realize these qualities himself.

The Indian, except on festivals and holidays, has no conception of congregational worship. His religion is personal and individual. There are no pews in Hindu Temples. No preachers in pulpits. The native erects buildings of worship wherever possible; their size is unimportant. Many a time have I seen miniature shrines housing a complement of tiny colored gods; shrines built into the roots of banyan trees, bare, save for a light that is kept burning, and stones emblematical of Shiva garlanded with flower chains offered by the passer-by.

The Temples of India bear very little resemblance to the churches of Christendom. The forms of Hindu worship do not include sitting in pews, listening to sermons, or other tabulated expressions of orthodoxy. The Indian visits his Temple to make an offering to the priests, meditate awhile, walk around the building, make obeisance to the presiding deity or to place flowers on a favorite shrine. The larger Temples have the added attractions of Temple musicians and Nautch-girls whose offices are hereditary, and whose duty it is to perform several times a day in the Temple ceremonies or on public Festivals. In Temples dedicated to Kali, the coterie includes sacrificers whose work consists of decapitating the goats that are brought as an offering to the Black Mother. These men are proud of their profession, and see nothing incongruous or belittling in their calling.

The great Temples of India, such as the Jaganath at Puri; the Melkota at Mysore; the Tirupati in Madras; the Velayudi at Palni

or the Rameswaram at Cape Comorin all have many Temple attendants, musicians, bards, and dancing girls who perform at the calendar festivals. Instead of sermons, there are songs taken from the many stories of the Gods and Goddesses; and as the Gods were the first patrons of music, they are also accredited with the inventions of the first musical instruments and the Ragas. Most of the material for songs in India is drawn from the sacred books, such as the Ramayana, the Vedic Hymns, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata or the Songs of Jahaveda.

Consider the bare and cold appearance of many churches with row on row of empty pews; the silence of week days; the loneliness and even forbidding aspect of remoteness except on service days. India knows no Sunday; every day is the same; the Temples are always open and alive and the worshippers are always present.

Looking backward at the gradual evolution of religion in India, we see that the Sun-worshippers came first, then the Animists, then Polytheism; and the great army of Gods created in the imagination to meet the needs of primitive humanity. Monotheism, as a later development has not held sway in this ancient country, for by the very multiplicity of his Gods, the Indian escapes monotony and boredom in his religion. If it is good luck he desires, he sets up Ganesh among his household gods; and decorates this jolly and elephant-headed deity with flower chains; if he desires love, he makes Puja to Kama or Krishna, or adds them to his family Pantheon and makes offerings to shrines. If he desires revenge on an enemy, he intercedes with Kali, or sacrifices a black male goat on her sanguinary altars in the village Temple. Christians have talked a great deal about "the blood of the Lamb," and drink the "blood and eat the body" on communion day; but I suspect that they would be shocked if one called them the prototypes of their heathen brothers, upon whom they look down with contemptuous pity. Where then, is the line between the civilized and uncivilized, or does it even exist?

A happy life must consist in expression, not repression; the Christian represses; the heathen expresses. The "thou-shalt-noters" of the world are sometimes the so-called Devil's best recruits. It is a poor psychologist who believes that prohibition ever prohibits. The apple trees of negation have always served only to stimulate appetite and excite curiosity. The Indian heathen does not worry about negations. His greatest moral caretaker is his own superstitious nature. His taboos are his only "thou-shalt-nots." He is superstitious, I grant you, but so are we; he has his little

private taboos: and so do we; he is sometimes cruel, but his cruelty is the result of ignorance not malice; we are both wise and cruel.

If the heathen deserts his old Gods, will not all the Gods desert him? Is not the God of the white man forever alien to the Children of the Sun? If an Indian of the simple Peasant class, whom I have taken for an example, is converted; what does he get in return for his joyous paganism? Where once he called on Vishnu or Shiva, he now turns a bewildered face up to the empty skies, shorn of the garments of his dreams. The more Puritanical his teacher, the more he is divested of beauty. All things that were natural and free to him, are wrong; all that he thought good, is bad; his brown nakedness is held up to mock him, and he is made to don the hideous garments of modernity; his imaginative and satisfying theology is ridiculed; he is a sinner, a savage, and a creature of scornful pity. He receives a vague, elusive, cold and unfamiliar maze of words in exchange for all the intimate and beloved manifestations of his old-time belief. The new religion does not make him happy, because it is an imperfect system, imperfectly practised and taught.

I have no quarrel with true Christianity, but unfortunately it is seldom tried. So I cannot see the point in fostering a bogus Christianity upon a people whose religion is natural, and to them entirely adequate. Perhaps in our moments of rebellion and instinctive avatism, we are manifesting the most encouraging signs of true evolution; and so long as we can hear the call of Paganism in our hearts, we are not altogether civilized, and there is hope for us!