

**NATURAL RELIGION IN  
INDIA: THE REDE LECTURE  
DELIVERED IN THE SENATE-  
HOUSE ON JUNE 17, 1891**

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Sir Alfred Lyall

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SIR ALFRED LYALL, K.C.B., K.C.I.E.

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1891

## NATURAL RELIGION IN INDIA.

I SHALL not endeavour to give, in this single lecture, any general description of Indian Religions. Nor do I propose to make any appreciable addition to the vast heap of facts and anecdotes, fables and folklore, that have been already collected in support of different theories regarding the origin of myth, ritual, primitive worships, and rudimentary belief. My present purpose is to draw attention, briefly, to the particular importance of India as a field of observation and research in identifying and tracing through connected stages the growth and filiation of some of the principal ideas that undoubtedly lie at the roots of Natural Religion.



When I speak of Religion in India, I mean, for the purpose of this Lecture, Hinduism. And if I were asked for a definition of Hinduism, I could give no precise answer; I could not define it concisely by giving its central doctrines and its essential articles of faith; as I might do in describing one of the great historical Religions. For the word Hindu is not exclusively a religious denomination; it denotes also a country, and to a certain degree a race. When we speak of a Christian, a Mahomedan, or a Buddhist, we mean a particular religious community, in the widest sense, without distinction of race or place. When we talk of a Russian or a Persian, we indicate country or parentage without distinction of creed. But when a man tells me that he is a Hindu, I know that he means all three things together—Religion, Parentage, and Country. I can be almost sure that he is an inhabitant of India, I know that he is an Indian by birth and descent; and as to his religion, the word Hindu, though it is rather indefinite, un-

doubtedly places him within one of the many groups or castes that follow the ordinances and worship the gods who are recognized by the Brahmans.

I would ask you to remark that we have here at once, at the first word, a significant indication of the peculiar character and composition of Hinduism. This triple meaning or connotation of the term Hindu shews the complexity of its origin, shews how Hinduism is twisted deep among the roots of Indian society, how it is a matter of birthright and inheritance; signifies that it means a civil community, quite as much as a religious association—that a man does not become a Hindu, but is born into Hinduism.

Let me illustrate this view of Hinduism, as different in type, origin, and constitution from the other great Religions, by pointing to its position on what I may call a Religious Map of the World—I suppose that in fact the geographical areas occupied by the chief religions

have often been mapped out. We may put aside Africa as wholly barbarous and benighted, except where its edges have been touched by light from Asia. Then such a map, supposing that it gave only the broad outlines and divisions, would exhibit all Europe and America overspread by Christianity, and in Asia it would shew that the three grand Historic Faiths or Creeds—Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism,—have made a nominal partition of the whole Continent, with the notable exception of one country. It would be seen that in all the three Continents there is one, and only one, country of the first magnitude, only one large population of settled civilization, that is not annexed to, or at least claimed by, one or another of these three Spiritual empires; and that people are the Hindus. If we mark off roughly the spheres of religion in Asia, we shall find that Western and Central Asia, from the Red Sea and the Mediterranean to the borders of India and the Chinese empire, is, speaking broadly, Mahomedan. On the other