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Letter III: Of the Gross and Blind Idolatry of the Malabarians. An Account of their several Idols. Their Notion of the Sun, and other Celestial Bodies.

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L E T T E R III.

*Of the Gross and Blind Idolatry of the
Malabarians.*

An Account of their several Idols.

*Their Notion of the Sun, and other Ce-
lestial Bodies.*

HAVING made some Enquiry into the Principles both of the *Divinity* and *Philosophy* now in vogue among these Heathens, and finding a vast difference betwixt their Divinity, and that which God has conferred upon us *Europeans*; I could not forbear to impart to you some account thereof; to the end, that by comparing one with the other, we might learn thus to set a right value upon the Grace vouchsafed unto us by the Goodness of God.

First then, As for the *Divinity* of the *Malabarians*; (This is the Name whereby they are commonly known in the Tract of the whole Country.) I have observed, that the same is interlaced with a World of Fables and Idolatrous Fictions. They have many Hundreds of Gods, but own nevertheless but one Divine Being, to be the Spring and original Source of all other Gods and Things. It is called by them *Isparetta*, which in their Language imports as much as a Deity. This *Isparetta*, they say, before any thing was created, transfor-
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med himself into an *Egg* : Out of which the whole System of Heaven and Earth, and all that is contained therein, was afterwards produced.

From this Divinity, as their Tradition runs, did originally spring forth something, which they call *Kiwelinga*, which is worshipped in their Temples like God. From this *Kiwelinga*, they say further, three other Great Gods took their Rise ; viz. *Bramma*, *Wischtnum*, and *Ispara*. *Bramma* is said to create and make all things : *Wischtnum*, to rule over things created ; and *Ispara*, to destroy 'em again. They are all three set up here in large *Pagodes* or Temples. Perhaps this poor People may have once heard, that there is one Divine Being, but made manifest in Three Persons ; they ascribing in many Things such Characters to *Bramma*, as we appropriate to J E S U S C H R I S T. They say, he has a humane Nature, but four Heads, and that he has given to Mankind four Books. The *First* of these did treat of Divinity, and of the First original Principle of all Things. The *Second* of Powers, and the Various Metamorphoses or Transmutations of all Things. The *Third* they say, contains Good Morals ; and the *Fourth*, the Duties to be observed in their Idolatrous Worship.

I was some Days ago with an Old Teacher of theirs, and desired him to transcribe for my use, the Three last of these Books in their own Language, offering him ready Money for his Labour ; but I could not prevail with him, he pretending it to be contrary to their Laws, to communicate them to a Christian. However, he promised to copy out for me such Morals
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and Customs, as were usually observed among 'em.

ISPARA is the Top of all the *Malabarian* Gods, and worshiped accordingly. He is erected in a large *Pagode* or Temple, having Three Eyes; one of which is fix'd in the Forehead, and by them believed to burn up all whatsoever it looks on. On each side he has Eight Hands, making Sixteen in all. In each of these he holdeth something particular; but I have not been able as yet, to learn the Mysteries figur'd out by these Things. On his Neck hangeth a little Bell, as the Cows use to wear in our Country. On his Forehead is seen a half Moon, and is for the rest arrayed with Serpents and Tygers. His Bigness they say, encompasses all the Seven Heavens above, and all the Seven Worlds beneath. There goes a Story among 'em, that this *Ispara* making once merry with his Heavenly Spirits, and looking on his Bigness, fancied he had none like to himself. *Bramma* and *Wischtnum*, much nettled at the excessive pride of their Fellow-God, pick'd a Quarel with him, which at last arose to such a heat, that *Bramma* lost one of his Heads by *Ispara's* valour. The latter being soon after convinc'd of the false step he had taken in this, fell a repenting for his disorderly doings, and rambled about begging, for twelve Years together. What strange Adventures he did meet with, during that interval, would be too tedious, to relate here at large. *Wischtnum* seeing his poor Brother-God wander about in such a beggerly Condition, attempts to rescue him; and for that purpose metamorphoseth himself into a Beautiful *Virgin*. But this Account is attended again with a long

train of Tales and Fictions, too prolix to be rehearsed here. However, these and other impertinent Stories are set out by the *Malabarians* in such fine Florishes of Wit, and adorn'd with such a poetical Air, that it may be pleasant enough to read em; tho' they refuse to impart them at large to any Christian, let there be never so much Money bid for them. I keep at present a particular School-Master in my House, whom I hope to prevail with, to transcribe for me the Stories and Transactions of their several Gods, in the Knowledge whereof he is extraordinarily well versed.

ISPARA has got three Sons; all which are worshipped here as Gods in three Temples. He has also one Daughter, whom they give out to be a great Princess among the Heavenly Virgins. She is as Black as a Cole, with three huge Sow-tushes in her Mouth. Our Governour lending me one Day his Horse, to take the Diversion of riding a little about in the Country, I had the good Hap, to see this Dame set out in all her Fineries, and riding in a handsome Chariot.

The third God, who is greatly esteem'd among the *Malabarians*, is *WISCHTNUM*; whom they report to be quite Black, with one Head and four Hands. They'll tell you a World of Stories of his Life and Actions. Among other Fictions they pretend, that he is subject to a tenfold Transmutation, the last of which is still to come. And this perhaps may be the chief Cause, that hath given birth to the Notion of the *Soul's Transmigration* after Death, now generally believed among these Heathens. The *First*
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Transmutation of this God was into a Fish; the *Second*, into a Tortois; the *Third*, into a Hogg; the *Fourth*, half into a Lion, and half into a Man; the *Fifth*, into a Bramine; (a) the *Sixth*, into a fair comely Child; the *Seventh*, into a Ram. They tell us, that this God understood in the Twelfth Year of his Age all the Secrets and Mysteries of Things. That afterwards he wrought a great many wonders up and down in the World; purchasing his Bride from a powerful King, by the Means of many surprizing exploits and atchievements. Soon after he had the Misfortune, to be bereav'd of his Bride by a crafty and valiant *Giant*, who having secretly conveyed her away, put *Wischnum* to a deal of Grief and Vexation. However, he rescued her at last from her captivity, after a long and tedious Combat, having defeated therein Thousands of Giants. And from these and other Tales of that nature, we may rationally infer, that this deluded People have heard some imperfect Rumour of Christ, but taken it

(a) 'Tis not explained what a Bramin is; but the Gentleman that publish'd an Account of Sir Thomas Roe's Voyage to East-India 1665, writes thus, Pag. 439. . The illiterate Priests of all that People for the generality of them are called Bramins, who derive themselves from Bramon, whom they say, was one of the first Men that inhabited the World. ——— Those Bramins, as I conceive, are they, which the ancient Stories call Brachmans, but with this difference, that these Brachmans were accounted learned Men, for the learning of those times wherein they lived; But these Bramins are a very silly, sottish, and ignorant sort of People; who are so inconstant in their Principles, as that they scarce know what the Particulars are, which they hold and maintain as Truths. Their Priest-hood is hereditary; for all these Bramins Sons are Priests, and they all take the Daughters of Bramins to be their Wives. They have Images in their Pagods made in monstrous Shapes, which the ancient Brachmans are said not to have endured.

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in all in a huddle, and interlacing it with a World of Fables:

As to the *Eighth* Transmutation, the Heathens do not pretend to any Certainty themselves. The *Ninth*, according to their Tradition, ended in the Shape of a Man, whom they represent, as one sitting in a doleful posture, and imploring the Great God Day and Night, with Eyes turned downwards. And they give out, he is to do so still these many Thousand Years, before he can be set at Liberty. And this they say, was the time, wherein they now lived. It may be, that this is a shadow of the Intercession of Christ; which they seem to point at in their Narration. His last and *Tenth* Transmutation, (and here we may guess, that they have likewise some imperfect Notion of the Day of *Judgment*;) is to be into a *Flying Horse*. About that time, they say, the Sins of Men would increase to a Prodigious height; insomuch that this Horse, would set down his Foot, now lifted up for the Punishment of Men, to the Ground, with so extraordinary an Impression, that the great Serpent which bears the Earth, trembling hereat, would let fall the World. And this would be the period of this World, and the beginning of another.

This short draught may serve, to give you a smack of their Ridiculous Theologie. One might add a great deal more concerning their *Philosophical* Principles; but for the present I'll only tell you, that they hold, there are Seven Heavens and Seven Worlds, altogether bore up by a swinging Serpent. In *Physical* and *Mathematical* Affairs, they don't seem to have any great Knowledge, tho' for the rest they be quick

enough of Appprehension. To the *Sun, Moon,* and other *Stars,* they attribute humane Souls. And particularly concerning the Sun, they tell us, that he has Seven Eyes, one whereof was only open at this present time: should the remaining six be opened too, no body would be able, to endure the heat thereof. *Thunder* is call'd by them the *Talk of the Clouds.* They believe, that there are many Angels, and that every one of them has a peculiar office to attend. They own no Resurrection of Bodies, but a *Transmigration* of the Soul into other Men, Dogs, Serpents, &c. From this springs up another Notion, viz. that whofo any ways abuseth another in this Life, shall after his Death become a Slave to the injured Person. They fancy, the World has been already thrice destroyed by Water, and would perish once more by the same Element. They hold that the Length of a Man had been in the beginning *four hundred Cubits,* but was afterwards gradually diminished, and would continue so to do, till he was reduced to a Span. The Years from the Creation of the World exceed already many Thousands of Thousands after their Calculation.

But I am tired with rehearsing to you so much of this uselefs trash. May the Lord commiserate the fate of these poor deluded Souls, and enlighten the Eyes of the Christians, to see, how far they are obliged, to improve the light of the Gospel, now so gloriously shining upon 'em, and walk as Children of the Light, whilst they have it! I remain

Yours

Tranquebar, Sept. the
2d. 1706.

B. Z.

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