NOTHING PROMISES TO PROVE MORE DANGEROUS TO THE BIBLE and to the Bible Christians — not even the new Revision of the sacred volume by the combined ecclesiastical talent of England, than that eminently Hindu funeral rite — cremation. The more this mode of disposing of the bodies of the dead comes into general practice the more it is calculated to strike terror into the hearts of the pious and God-fearing folk who look forward to death, because of the resurrection at the last joyful summons from the Angel’s trumpet. But with cremation resurrection has become impossible. But since matters cannot be mended, and science has entered into a league with the heathens, even such a bigoted country as Italy, priest-ridden and Jesuit-ridden as it is, has taken the lead in cremation. Germany, according to a correspondent of the Pall Mall Gazette, has also its own Cremation Hall at Gotha, a handsome and spacious building, and artistically inferior to only that of Milan. It has been in existence about two years and a half, and was built by an association or Verein of some of the most thoughtful and learned men in Germany. The correspondent adds:

Fifty-two persons, five of whom were women, have in this space of time chosen such a form of burial [does not this sound like a bull?], one body being sent from New York. The cost of the mere process of cremation is about five pounds sterling, and the religious ceremony can be first read over [302] the body. It is unnecessary to say that the Catholic priest refuses church burial to anyone electing to be cremated. Protestant pastors, on the contrary, willingly accord it. The cinerary urns bear the name of one or two Jews.

It would be worthwhile determining as to who are the most consistent — the Catholic priests, the Protestant pastors, or the Jews? The correspondent thus concludes:

I think few visitors will visit this cremation hall without being duly impressed in favour of a system so advantageous to the living, and, it must be admitted — at least, of France and Germany — also advantageous to the dead. Here, as in France, the law compels such prompt interment that in many cases it has been known to take place before the breath has left the body. In Algeria I have known personally a victim of this misapprehension; and my German friends all speak to me in warm terms of the new system as, irrespective of other advantages, preventing premature burial.

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1 Frontispiece: A distressed Rama [right] looks on as Sita [left] protected by Agni, undergoes Agni Pariksha. Maya Sita is replaced by Sita in the Agni Pariksha episode.

2 [Square brackets, are H.P. Blavatsky’s own. — Boris de Zirkoff.]
HE FINAL MARRIAGE CEREMONY, after which the woman is forever cut off from the external world, had just begun. We kept our eyes and ears open and decided to observe everything more closely than ever. The bridegroom and the bride were placed before the altar. With their hands tied by long blades of *khus-khus* grass, the Brâhmana led them three times around the altar; their hands were then untied and the priest mumbled a mantra. When he had finished, the boy bridegroom lifted his diminutive bride and carried her in his arms three times around the altar; then they both walked three times around, the bridegroom preceding the bride, she following him like an obedient wife. When this was over, the young husband was placed on a high chair by the entrance door, while the bride took a basin of water, knelt at the feet of her future ruler, took off his shoes and, having washed his feet, wiped them with her long hair — a custom really most ancient, as we noticed. On the bride-groom’s right sat his mother. The bride knelt before her also, and, having performed a similar operation on her mother-in-law’s feet, she retired to the house. Then her mother came out of the crowd and repeated the same ceremony on the feet of her son-in-law and his mother, but without using her hair as a towel. The wedding was over. The drums and tom-toms sounded once more, and, half-deafened by them, we started for home.

In the tent we found the *akâli* delivering a sermon to Mr. W. and the “silent general,” on the religion of “Nanak” and all the soul-saving advantages of ‘Sikhism,” as compared with the religion of the “devil-worshippers,” as he [239] called the Brâhmanas. Our friend was right. Satan himself could not have devised, in his moments of genius, anything more unjust, more subtly cruel, than that which these “twice-born” infernal rascals had conjured up in regard to woman. Complete, unconditional social death is in store for her in case of widowhood, even if this occurs when she is but a five or three year old girl, and even in cases of betrothal, during which ceremony, as we have just seen, she is not even present, but is figuratively represented by the sacrifice of a goat. The male, on the other hand, has the right to have several wives, though it should be stated, in justice to the Hindus, that we have not yet heard of an instance of any of them having *more than one* wife, with the exception of the depraved princes and the Maharajas, trained in drunkenness and other charms of Western civilization by the Residents and their wardens, the English. In case of a widower, the man is required to enter into a second *and* even third marriage. No such law exists for the woman. For her, a second marriage is considered a great sin, an unheard of shame.

As I write these lines, agitators and opponents of the Brâhmanas have initiated a reform movement in Bombay, in regard to the remarriage of widows, and this is bound to shake the whole of orthodox India to its very foundation. It is now ten years since Mûlji-Thâkur-Singh and other reformers raised this question (but only two or three
individuals availed themselves of the opportunity). The struggle is one of life and death, a struggle that is silent and secret, but nevertheless fierce and obstinate. In the meantime, this is what every widow can expect; as soon as the corpse of her husband is burned, the widow must shave her head and remain shaved from then on. She is not allowed to wear any of her adornments; her bracelets, rings and necklaces are broken to pieces and burned together with her hair and her husband’s remains. During the rest of her life, from head to foot, she must wear nothing but white, if she be less than twenty-five when widowed, and red, if older. The temples, religious ceremonies and society are closed to her forever. She has no right to speak to any of her relatives or to eat with them. She sleeps, eats and works separately, and her touch is considered impure for seven years. If a man, going out to business in the morning, meets a widow first, he goes home again and postpones his business for another day, meeting a widow is the worst omen. Caught in the false interpretation of the Vedas, with the criminal intention burning widows in order to appropriate wealth, the Brāhmanas, unable any longer to carry out this cruel custom, have revived the ancient precept which was but rarely put practice — and then merely in the case of rich widows refusing the last minute to be burned — and have applied it to all widows indiscriminately. Powerless against British law they revenge themselves on the innocent and unhappy women.

The story of how Professor Wilson caught the Brahman distorting the text of the Vedas and practicing deception is most curious. For long centuries they cruelly burned the wretched widows, appealing for justification to a certain hymn of the Rigveda, and claiming to be rigidly fulfilling the institutes of Manu, the interpreter of their revelation. When the British government first declared its intention to suppress the burning of widows, the whole country, from Cape Comorin to the Himālayas, rose in protest under the influence of the Brāhmanas.

The English promised to uphold the policy of non-interference in our religious affairs, and they must keep their word, was the general outcry. Never was India so near revolution as in those days. The English seeing that things were bad, did nothing. But Wilson the best Sanskritist of the day, did not consider the bat lost. He searched the most ancient manuscripts, until he became convinced that the alleged precept did not exist anywhere in the Vedas, though in the Laws of Manu, the infallible, interpreter of the “revelation,” it seemed to stand out clearly, and had been translated accordingly by H.T. Colebrook and other Orientalists. The affair was becoming: embarrassing. An effort to prove that Manu’s interpretation was wrong would have been tantamount, in view of popular fanaticism, to attempting to reduce water to powder. So Wilson set himself to study Manu, comparing the text of the Vedas with the text of the lawgiver. And this was the result of his labour: the Rigveda orders the Brahmana to place the widow side by side with the corpse, before the pyre is lighted, and then, after certain rites have been performed, to lead her down from the funeral pyre and loudly to sing to her the following verse from the Rigveda:

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1 X, 18, 8
Rise up, woman, come to the world of living beings, thou sleepest nigh unto the lifeless. Come; thou hast been associated with maternity through the husband by whom thy hand was formerly taken.¹

Then the women present at the burning rubbed their eyes with collyrium, and the Brahmana addressed to them the following verse:²

May these women, who are not widows, who have good husbands, who are mothers, enter with unguents and clarified butter: without tears, without sorrow, let them first go up into the dwelling.³

It is precisely the last few words that were distorted by the Brāhmanas in the most cunning and subtle manner. The original of these words reads thus:

ārohantu janayo yonimagre,

which literally means:

“first let the mothers enter into the womb of the altar”

(yonim agre — within the altar)

Changing one letter of the last word “agre,” which they altered to “agne” (fire), the Brāhmanas acquired the right for centuries on end to send the hapless Malabar widows into the yonim agneh — the “womb of fire.”⁴ [242]

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² [Rigveda, X, 18, 7]

³ [Prof. Wilson’s translation]

⁴ [We give below the transliteration in Roman characters of the original Devanāgarī of these two verses from the Rigveda:

Imā nārāvīdhavāḥ supatīrātjanena sarpihāḥ sam viśantu.
Anaśravo’namivāḥ surāntaḥ ārohantu janayo yonimagre (X, 18, 7).
Udirshaḥ nāryabhi jīvalokam gatāsūmetamupa śesah ehi
Hastragrābhyasā didhiśhostavedam patyurjanitvamabhi sam babhūtha (X, 18, 8).

These are also given in the Atharvaveda, XII, 2, 31 and XVIII, 3, 57; there was a controversy between Colebrooke and Prof. Wilson about the translation of these verses, and Colebrooke was of the view that they gave authority for the practice of suttee. (See Asiatic Researches, Vol. IV, 1799, p. 213) In doing so, he took the reading jala-yonimagne which is given by one of the commentators on law codes, Raghunandana, in his Śudhītattva. This is a comparatively late work.

The reading which Prof. Wilson adopts and the translation he gives of ārohantu . . . has the authority of the most famous of Vedic commentators, Sayana. None of the Grihya-Sūtras (ancient texts containing procedures for ceremonies) nor Dharmā-Sūtras (ancient law codes in the form of aphorisms), except that of Vishnu, gives any procedure for suttee, which means that it did not exist then. But the later law codes and then the commentators, including Raghunandana, began to prescribe the use of these two verses for the performance of suttee.

There is a learned and interesting discussion on this complicated subject in Dr. P.V. Kane’s History of Dharmaśāstra, Vol. II, pp. 617-19 and 625-35 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1941). See also Dr. A.S. Altekar, The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, Benares, The Culture Publication House, Hindu University, 1938. Dr. Kane points out that Raghunandana could not have altered the Vedic verse as thousands of people knew the Vedas by heart in those days. Either the Ms. of his Śudhītattva is corrupt, or he made an innocent mistake. He had no reason to change āgrem to āgne, because even the original reading had been taken as authority for suttee even before Raghunandana’s time by Aparārka and others. Dr. Kane points out that the first verse has nothing to do with the widow but refers to other women relations, friends, etc. As for the second verse, in ancient times it was used to make the widow rise after she had been asked to sit near the body of her husband, which might have had a symbolical meaning or may have been a relic of pre-Vedic practice of suttee. Later on the first verse was used in the suttee ceremonial which had been created.

Not only did the Vedas never permit the burning of widows, but there is even a passage in the Taittiriya-Aranyaka¹ of the Yajur-Veda where the younger brother of the deceased, or his disciple, or even a trusted friend, in case no other relative exists, addresses the widow in the following terms:

Arise, Oh woman! do not any longer lie beside the lifeless corpse; return to the world of the living, far from the deceased husband, and become the wife of the one who holds you by the hand, and is willing become your husband.

This verse shows that during the [243] Vedic period a second marriage for widows did exist; and, furthermore, in several places in ancient manuscripts pointed out to us by Swami Dayānanda, we found orders to the widow, 

. . . to gather and keep the ashes and bones of the husband for several months after his death, and to perform over them certain final rites . . .

However, notwithstanding the complete exposure, and the scandal created by Professor Wilson’s discovery, as well as the fact that the Brāhmānas had to bow to the double authority of the Vedas and Manu, the custom of centuries proved so strong that some super-pious Hindu women still burn themselves when they can. Only two years ago, on the death of Yung Bahādur, chief minister of Nepal, his four widows insisted upon being burned. Nepal is not under British rule, and so the Anglo-Indian Government had no right to interfere.

The Brahmans, sons of Aryavarta, may perhaps learn a lesson or two from their savage fellow-men of America.

Having read an article signed with the above pseudonym in The Philosophic Inquirer of July 1st, in which the hapless condition of the Hindū widow is so sincerely bemoaned, the idea struck me that it may not be uninteresting to your readers, the opponents as well as the supporters of child-marriage and widow-marriage, to learn that the sacerdotal caste of India is not a solitary exception in the cruel treatment of those unfortunates whom fate has deprived of their husbands. Those who look upon the re-marriage of their bereaved females with horror, as well as those who may yet be secretly sighing for Suttee, will find worthy sympathizers among the savage and fierce tribe of the Talkotins of Oregon (America). Says Ross Cox in his Adventures on the Columbia River:

The ceremonies attending the dead are very singular, and quite peculiar to this tribe. . . . During the nine days the corpse is laid out the widow of the deceased is obliged to sleep alongside it from sunset to sunrise; and from this custom there is no relaxation, even during the hottest days of summer! [While the ceremony of cremation is being performed, and the doctor (or “medicine man”) is trying for the last time his skill upon the corpse, and using useless incantations to bring him back to life, the widow] must lie on the pile; and after the fire is applied to it, she cannot stir until the doctor orders her to be removed;

¹ VI, 10, 2
which, however, is never done until her body is completely covered with blisters. After being placed on her legs, she is obliged to pass her hands gently through the flames, and collect some of the liquid fat which issues from the corpse, with which she is permitted to rub her face and body! When the friends of the deceased observe the sinews of the legs and arms beginning to contract they compel the unfortunate widow to go again on the pile, and by dint of hard pressing to straighten those members.

If during her husband’s lifetime she has been known to have committed any act of infidelity, or omitted administering to him savoury food, or neglected his clothing, etc., she is now made to suffer severely for such lapses of duty by his relations, who frequently fling her on the funeral pile, from which she is dragged by her friends, and thus, between alternate scorching and cooling she is dragged backwards and forwards until she falls into a state of insensibility. After which she is saved and allowed to go.

But if the widow was faithful, respectful and a good wife, then:

After the process of burning the corpse has terminated the widow collects the larger bones, which she rolls up in an envelope of birch bark, and which she is obliged for some years afterwards to carry on her back! She is now considered and treated as a slave; all the laborious duties of cooling, collecting fuel, etc., devolve on her. She must obey the orders of all the women, and even of the children belonging to the village, and the slightest mistake or disobedience subjects her to the infliction of a heavy punishment. The wretched widows, to avoid this complicated cruelty, frequently commit suicide. Should she, however, linger on for three or four years, the friends of her husband agree to relieve her from her painful mourning. This is a ceremony of much consequence.

Our Brahmans, the descendants of the Rishis and the sons of Āryāvarta, once upon a time the cradle as well as the hot-bed of civilization, may perhaps learn a lesson or two from their savage fellow-men of America.

1 The latter shave their widow’s hair, only if she has become guilty of unfaithfulness;

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1 [Vol. II, pp. 339-41]
2 [Vol. II, pp. 341-42]
Having submitted to the penalty of widowhood, and having been made to suffer for a visitation due to the will of a kind God ("the dispenser of life and death," and the protector of the widow, child, and the helpless), three or four years after that, she is relieved of her torture by the tribe she belongs to; a party of savages, of brutes who have never heard of civilization. She is permitted to remarry, there being thus a limit assigned to her suffering.

This is in itself an improvement upon the everlasting misery of the Hindu widow. But then there are neither “B.A.’s”¹ nor “B.L.’s”² among the Oregon Talkotin savages!

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¹ [Bachelor of Art]
² [Bachelor of Law]