THE APOLOGY OF TERTULLIAN, AND THE MEDITATIONS OF THE EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS

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The apology of Tertullian, and the meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus by Wm. Reeve & Jeremy Collier

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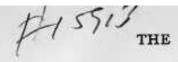
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WM. REEVE & JEREMY COLLIER

THE APOLOGY OF TERTULLIAN, AND THE MEDITATIONS OF THE EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS

Trieste



APOLOGY OF TERTULLIAN

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AND THE

MEDITATIONS OF THE EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES.

WITHIN the present volume we have given two of the most interesting and important works of the days of early Christianity. The one is the great Apology of the most eloquent of the early Fathers of the Church—" the father of Latin Christianity," as Dean Milman calls him; the other is the ethical treatise of the puresouled Stoic Emperor, the first great general persecutor of the Christian Church. A few prefatory words are needed upon each, but the reader is referred to the previous volume of this series— Bishop Kaye's account of Tertullian—for fuller details about him.

The life of Tertullian is only known to us through his writings. He was born at Carthage about A.D. 160, and died about 240; but the precise dates are uncertain. He was trained as a lawyer, but was converted to Christianity in 192, and became a priest. He was married, but childless. It was probably about ten years after his conversion that he became a Montanist, moved, as Bishop Kaye believes, by the laxity of the clergy that he saw around him, and the longing to find a stricter life. The same learned writer shows that his Montanist writings are among the most valuable, simply because, in his unsparing attacks on what he held to be faulty in the practices and discipline of the Church, he unconsciously preserves for our information what these were.

The work before us is the greatest of Tertullian's writings. The deeply religious heathen Emperor, M. Aurelius, died in 180, and was succeeded by his unworthy son, Commodus. He was followed by Septimius Severus, the first of the "Barrack Emperors," in other words, of those military adventurers who held the Roman Empire down to the days of Dioclesian, following one another rapidly, and, with hardly a single exception, dying violent deaths. The golden age of the Empire was gone, it was the iron age now. But the Christian Church, after a period of silent growth, after worship in caves and catacombs, was now a recognised power in the Empire. It had a new philosophy to offer men, and a nascent literature; it boldly put forth its claims to obedience, and made converts among the rich and learned. M. Aurelius had done his utmost to crush it; Commodus had not done so, some of his courtiers were Christians, and persuaded him to leave their co-religionists alone. And Sept. Severus pursued in the main the same policy.

But the African Church was an exception to the general immunity. Much depended everywhere on the disposition of the several proconsuls towards the faith. There had been laws in existence against it ever since the days of Nero, and it depended altogether on the various governors whether these laws should stand in abeyance or be put in vigorous exercise. There were by this time many thousands of believers in Africa; and now heathen fanaticism, which had been long smouldering, broke out. The priestesses of the " Dea Cœlestis " had raised seditious mobs, and allied heathens and Jews had destroyed Christian churches, and rifled and desecrated their burial-places. Caricatures of Christ were paraded through the streets, and the usual ridiculous charges of incest and cannibalism were brought against his disciples. It was all this which produced Tertullian's Apology.

He first addresses himself (chaps, i.-vi.) to this general argument, that the rulers at Carthage are persecuting a body of men, who are undeserving of condemnation. Trajan's counsel to Pliny, that Christians were not to be sought out, but if brought before him were to be punished, as the apologist rightly maintains, was illogical and confused. But the present action of the governing power was yet worse; it was persecuting a religion which confessedly was a strong agent in the reformation of popular morals. He then goes on to state what are the charges brought against Christians, and to assert their falsity (vii.-ix.), then takes them in detail. First, "sacrilege" and "treason." He meets the first by declaring that the gods of the heathen are no gods (x.-xv.), and then by demonstrating that Christians have a devout worship of their own, and profound reverence for Him whom they recognise as their God, and in doing this he refutes certain calumnies which have been brought against this worship (xvi,-xxiii.). These chapters are full of information concerning early Church customs. He goes on to say that it is the heathens and not the Christians who are really the impious, and that it is not true that Christians are enemies of the Commonwealth, seeing that the greatness of Rome owes nothing to

its heathen faith. And he retorts upon them the charge of impiety, by declaring that they hold Cæsar in greater dread than they do their gods, whilst the Christians pray to their God for Cæsar's welfare, though they will not pay that Cæsar lying honour. Then our apologist, dealing with details, argues passionately and grandly on behalf of a body of men who do not take vengeance for the wrongs that they are suffering. It has been many a time within their power to have raised the whirlwind against the government, but they have refrained; but they are strong in the knowledge of their coming victory. And he demands that therefore they should at once be admitted amongst the licensed "sects." Gathering strength as he is carried along on the stream of his majestic eloquence, and with the consciousness that he is gaining the better of his opponents at every turn, he breaks out into a magnificent peroration, partly of the deepest feeling, partly of withering scorn, and ends in a climax of impassioned and confident appeal.

The author of the present translation, as I learn from a letter sent to me by the present Rector, was Rector of Cranford from 1694 to 1726.

MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS, who was Emperor of Rome from A.D. 161-180, was the noblest and purest of all who wore the purple. He came of a noble race, his two grandfathers had both been consuls. He was a favourite with the Emperor Hadrian from infancy; and whereas his father's surname was Verus, Hadrian familiarly called the child "Verissimus" from his disposition ; and further, when he adopted Antoninus Pius as his heir, he made it a condition that he in turn should adopt the father of the young Aurelius. The boy's father dying early, his education was carried on by his grandfather, who assiduously sought out the best teachers that were to be found ; and thus it was that M. Aurelius was trained as a Stoic. As he grew up he justified the expectations that were formed of him, attending strictly to all duties committed to him, and never yielding to the temptation to subordinate them to the studies that he loved. Antoninus Pius, on becoming Emperor, A.D. 138, bestowed his daughter upon him, and on his death was succeeded by him, at the urgent request of the Senate, for Aurelius was unwilling.