

**THE HISTORY OF THE ORIGINS OF  
CHRISTIANITY. BOOK VI.  
COMPRISING THE REIGNS OF  
HADRIAN AND ANTONINUS PIUS  
(A.D. 117-161)**

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The History of the Origins of Christianity. Book VI. Comprising the Reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (A.D. 117-161) by Ernest Renan

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## PREFACE.

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I THOUGHT at first that this Sixth Book would finish the series of volumes which I have devoted to the history of the origins of Christianity. It is certain that at the death of Antoninus, *circa* A.D. 160, the Christian religion had become a complete religion, having all its sacred books, all its grand legends, the germ of all its dogmas, the essential parts of its liturgies; and in the eyes of most of its adherents, it was a religion standing by itself, separated from and even opposed to Judaism. I, however, thought it right to add a last work, containing the ecclesiastical history of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, to the preceding books. In the truest sense, the reign of Marcus Aurelius belongs to the origins of Christianity. Montanism is a phenomenon of about the year 170, and is one of the most notable events of early Christianity. After more than a century had elapsed since those strange hallucinations which had possessed the apostles at the Last Supper at Jerusalem,

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suddenly in some remote districts of Phrygia there sprung up again prophecy, the glossolalia, those graces which the author of the Acts of the Apostles praises so much. But it was too late: under Marcus Aurelius, religion, after the confused manifestations of Gnosticism, had more need of discipline than of miraculous gifts. The resistance that orthodoxy, as represented by the episcopate, was able to offer to the prophets of Phrygia, was the decisive act of the constitution of the Church. It was admitted that, above individual inspiration, there existed the average judgment of the universal conscience. This average opinion, which will triumph in the course of the history of the Church, and which, representing as it did relative good sense, constituted the power of that great institution, was already perfectly characterised under Marcus Aurelius. A description of the first struggles which thus took place between individual liberty and ecclesiastical authority, seemed to me to be a necessary part of the history which I wished to trace of rising Christianity.

But besides that, there was another reason that decided me to treat the reign of Marcus Aurelius in its relations to the Christian community in the fullest detail. It is partial and unjust to represent the endeavours of Christianity as an isolated fact, as a unique, and, in a manner, a miraculous attempt at religious and social reform. Christianity was not alone in attempting what it alone was able to carry out. Timidly still in the first century, openly and



brilliantly in the second, all virtuous men of the ancient world were longing for an improvement in morals and in the laws, and piety thus became a general requirement of the time. With regard to high intellectual culture, the century was not what the preceding age had been; there were no men of such large minds as Cæsar, Lucretius, Cicero and Seneca, but an immense work of moral amelioration was going on in all directions, and philosophy, Hellenism, the Eastern creeds and Roman probity, contributed equally to this. The fact that Christianity has triumphed is no reason for being unjust towards those noble attempts which ran parallel with its own, and which only failed because they were too aristocratic, and did not possess enough of that mystic character which was formerly necessary in order to attract the people. In order to be perfectly just, the two attempts ought to be studied together, allowances ought to be made for both, and it ought to be explained why one has succeeded whilst the other has not.

The name of Marcus Aurelius is the most noble among all that noble school of virtue which tried to save the ancient world by the force of reason, and thus a thorough study of that great man belongs essentially to our subject. Why did not that reconciliation between the Church and the Empire, which took place under Constantine, take place under Marcus Aurelius? It is all the more important to settle this question, as already in this volume we

shall see that the Church identifies her destinies with those of the Empire.

In the latter half of the second century, some Christian doctors of the highest authority seriously faced the possibility of making Christianity the official religion of the Roman world, and it might almost be said that they divined the great events of the fourth century. Looked at closely, that resolution by which Christianity, having entirely changed its past, has become the *protégé*, or perhaps we had better say the protector, of the State, from having been persecuted by it, ceases to be surprising. St Justin and Melito foresaw this quite clearly. St Paul's principle, "All power is of God," will bear its fruits, and the Gospel will become, what Jesus certainly did not foresee, one of the bases of absolutism. Christ will have come into the world to guarantee the crowns of princes, and in our days a Roman Pontiff has tried to prove that Jesus Christ preached and died to preserve the fortunes of the wealthy, and to consolidate capital.

As we advance in this history, we shall find that documents become more certain, and preliminary discussions less necessary. The question of the Fourth Gospel has been so often treated in the preceding volumes, that we need not return to that subject now. The falseness of the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, which are attributed to St Paul, has been already demonstrated, and the apocryphal character of the Second Epistle of St Peter is shown

by the few pages which are devoted to that work. The problems of the epistles attributed to St Ignatius, and of the epistle attributed to St Polycarp, are absolutely identical, and attention need only be drawn to what has been said in the introduction to our preceding work. Nobody has any further doubt about the approximate age of the *Pastor* of Hermas. The account of Polycarp's death bears the same characteristics of authenticity as the epistle to the faithful at Lyons and Vienne, which will be mentioned in our last book, and to discriminate between the authentic and the supposititious works of St Justin, does not require the same lengthy explanation as the introductions to the former volumes naturally did. It can plainly be seen, and all signs seem to point to the fact, that we are approaching the end of the age of origins. Ecclesiastical history is about to begin. The same interest is felt in it, but everything takes place in the full light of day, and for the future, criticism will no longer encounter those obscurities which can only be got over by hypotheses or bold speculation. *Hic cæsus artemque repono.* After Irenæus and Clement of Alexandria, our old works on Ecclesiastical History of the seventeenth century are almost sufficient. Any one who reads in Fleury the two hundred and twenty pages that correspond to our seven volumes, will perceive all the difference. The seventeenth century only cared to know what was quite clear, and all origins are obscure; but for the philosophic mind,