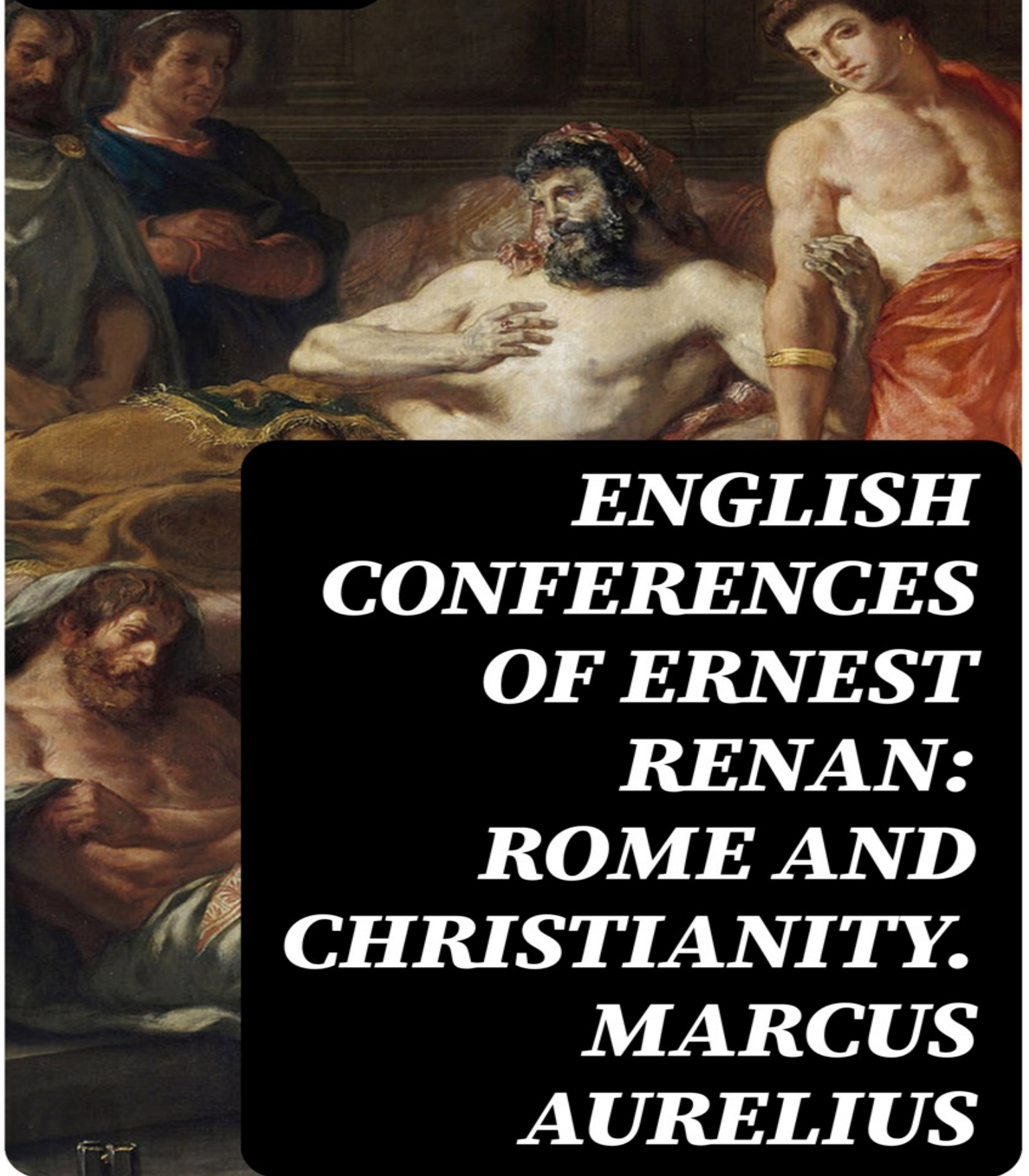


***ERNEST
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***ENGLISH
CONFERENCES
OF ERNEST
RENAN:
ROME AND
CHRISTIANITY.
MARCUS
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Ernest Renan

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I.

You have asked me to retrace before you one of those pages of religious history which places the thoughts which I come to express in their fullest aspect. The origins of Christianity form the most heroic episode in the history of humanity. Man never drew from his heart more devotion, more love of the ideal, than in the one hundred and fifty years which elapsed from the sweet Galilean vision, under Tiberius, to the death of Marcus Aurelius. The religious consciousness was never more eminently creative, and never laid down with more authority the law of the future. This extraordinary movement, to which no other can be compared, came forth from the bosom of Judaism. But it is doubtful if Judaism alone would have conquered the world. It was necessary that a young and bold school, coming out of its midst, should take the audacious part of renouncing the largest portion of the Mosaic ritual. It was necessary, above all, that the new movement should be transported into the midst of the Greeks and Latins, while awaiting the Barbarians, and become like yeast in the bosom of those European races by which humanity accomplishes its destinies. What a beautiful subject he will discourse upon who shall one day explain to you the part which Greece took in that great common work! You have commissioned me to show to you the part of Rome. The action of Rome is the first in date. It was scarcely until the beginning of the third century that the Greek genius, with Clement of Alexandria and Origen, really seized upon Christianity. I hope to show

you, that, since the second century, Rome has exercised a decisive influence upon the Church of Jesus.

In one sense, Rome has diffused religion through the world, as she has diffused civilization, as she has founded the idea of a central government, extending itself over a considerable part of the world. But even as the civilization which Rome has diffused has not been the small, narrow, austere culture of ancient Latium, but in fact the grand and large civilization which Greece created, so the religion to which she definitely lent her support was not the niggardly superstition which was sufficient to the rude and primitive inhabitants of the Palatine: it was Judaism, that is to say, in fact, the religion which Rome scorned and hated most, that which two or three times she believed herself to have finally vanquished to the profit of her own national worship. This ancient religion of Latium, which contented a race endowed with narrow intellectual wants and morals, among which customs and social rank almost held the place of a religion during some centuries, was a sufficiently despicable thing. As M. Boissier has perfectly proved, a more false conception of the divinity was never seen. In the Roman worship, as in most of the ancient Italiote worships, prayer was a magic formula, acting by its own virtue, independent of the moral dispositions of him who prayed. People prayed only for a selfish end. There exist some registers called *indigitamenta*, containing lists of the gods who supply all the wants of men; thus there was no need of being deceived. If the god was not addressed by his true name, by that under which it pleased him to be invoked, he was capable of misapprehension, or of interpreting capriciously. Now these

gods, who are in some degree the forces of the world, are innumerable. There was a little god who made the infant utter his first cry (*Vaticanus*); there was another who presided over his first word (*Fabulinus*); another who taught the baby to eat (*Educa*); another who taught him to drink (*Potina*); another who made him keep quiet in his cradle (*Cuba*). In truth, the good wife of Petronius was right, when, in speaking of the Campagna, she said, "This country is so peopled with divinities, that it is easier to find a god than a man." Besides these, there were unending series of allegories, or deified abstractions, Fear, the Cough, Fever, Manly Fortune, Patrician Chastity, Plebeian Chastity, the Security of the Age, the Genius of the Customs (or of the *octroi*), and above all (listen, that one who, to say the truth, was the great god of Rome), the Safety of the Roman People. It was a civil religion in the full force of the term. It was essentially the religion of the State. There was no priesthood distinct from the functions of the State: the State was the veritable god of Rome. The father had there the right of life and death over his son; but if this son had the least function, and the father met him in his path, he descended from his horse, and bent himself before him.

The consequence of this essentially political character was, that the Roman religion remained always an aristocratic religion. A man became pontiff as he became prætor or consul. When a man desired these religious functions, he submitted to no examination; he went into no retreat in a seminary; he did not ask himself whether he had the ecclesiastical vocation: he proved that he had served his country well, and that he had been wounded in a certain

battle. There was no sacerdotal spirit. These civil pontiffs remained cold, practical men, and had not the least idea that their functions should separate them from the world. The religion of Rome is, in every respect, the inversion of theocracy. Civil law rules acts: it does not trouble itself with thoughts; thus did the Roman religion. Rome never had the least idea of dogma. The exact observation of the rites commanded by the divinity, in which it did not regard piety or the sentiments of the heart, if the request was in form, was all that was required. Even more,—devotion was a fault; calmness, order, regularity, only, were necessary: more than that was an excess (*superstitio*). Cato absolutely forbade that a slave should be allowed to conceive any sentiment of piety. "Know," said he, "that it is the master who sacrifices for all the household." It was not needful to neglect what was due to the gods; but it was not needful to give them more than was due: that was superstition, of which the true Roman had as much horror as of impiety.

Was there ever, I ask you, a religion less capable of becoming the religion of the human race than that? Not only was the access to the priesthood for a long time forbidden to the plebeians, but they were also excluded from the public worship. In the great struggle for civil equality which fills the history of Rome, religion is the great argument with which the revolutionists are opposed. "How," say they, "could you become a prætor or consul? You have not the right to take the omens." Above all, the people were very little attached to religion. Each popular victory was followed, as one may say, by an anti-clerical re-action: on the

contrary, the aristocracy remained always faithful to a worship which gave a divine sanction to its privileges.

The matter became still more pressing when the Roman people, by their manly, patriotic virtues, had conquered all the nations upon the borders of the Mediterranean. What interest, think you an African, a Gaul, a Syrian, took in a worship which concerned only a small number of high and often tyrannical families? The local religions were continued everywhere; but Augustus, who was still more a religious organizer than a great politician, made the Roman idea to hover everywhere by the establishment of the Roman worship. The altars of Rome and of Augustus became the centre of a hierarchical organization of Flamens and Augustan *Sevirs*, who served to found, more than one imagines, the divisions of the dioceses and ecclesiastical provinces. Augustus admitted all the local gods as Lares; he allowed more than the number of Lares in each house; at each cross-road an additional Lare was placed,—the Genius of the Emperor. Thanks to this fellowship, all the local gods and all the special gods became "Augustan gods." It was a great advance. But this grand attempt of the worship of the Roman State was notoriously insufficient to satisfy the religious needs of the heart. There was elsewhere a god who could not accommodate himself in any way to this fraternity: it was the God of the Jews. It was impossible to make Jehovah pass for a Lare, and associate with the Genius of the Emperor. It was evident that a conflict must be established between the Roman State and this unchangeable and refractory God, who did not bend to the

complaisant transformations exacted by the politics of the times.

Ah, well! behold the most extraordinary historical phenomenon, the most intense irony of all history: it is that the worship which Rome has diffused through the world is not in the least the old worship of Jupiter Capitolinus, or Latiaris, still less the worship of Augustus and of the Genius of the Emperor: it is, in truth, the worship of Jehovah. It is Judaism in its Christian form that Rome has propagated, without wishing it, in so powerful a manner, that, from a certain epoch, Romanism and Christianity have become almost synonymous words.

Truly, I repeat it, it is more than doubtful if pure Judaism—that which is developed under the Talmudical form, and which is still in our day so powerful—would have had this extraordinary fortune. Judaism propagates itself through Christianity. But one understands nothing of religious history (some one, I hope, will demonstrate it to you some day), unless it is fixed as a fundamental principle that Christianity had its origin in Judaism itself,—Judaism with its fruitful principles of alms and charity, with its absolute confidence in the future of humanity, with that joy of the heart of which it has always had the secret,—only Judaism freed from some observances and distinctive traits which had been invented to characterize the special religion of the children of Israel.

II.

If one studies in fact the progress of the primitive Christian missions, he remarks that they are all directed towards the West: in other words, they take the Roman

Empire as their theatre and limit. If one excepts some small portions of the vassal territory of the Arsacidæ, lying between the Euphrates and the Tigris, the empire of the Parthians received no Christian missions during the first century. The Tigris was an eastern boundary which Christianity did not pass under the Sassanidæ. Two great causes—the Mediterranean and the Roman Empire—determined this capital fact.

The Mediterranean had been, during a thousand years, the great route on which all civilizations and all ideas had passed each other. The Romans, having freed it from piracy, had made it an unequalled way of communication. It was in a sense the railroad of that time. A numerous marine of coasting-vessels rendered the voyages along the borders of this great lake very easy. The relative security which the routes of the empire afforded, the sure guaranties found in the public powers, the scattering of the Jews over all the coasts of the Mediterranean, the use of the Greek tongue in the eastern portion of this sea, the unity of civilization which the Greeks first, and then the Romans, had created, made the map of the empire also the map of the countries reserved to the Christian missions and destined to become Christian. The Roman *orbis* became the Christian *orbis* in the sense in which it may be said that the founders of the empire were the founders of the Christian monarchy, or, at least, that they have drawn its outlines. Every province conquered by the Roman Empire became a province conquered by Christianity. Let the figures of the apostles be imagined in the presence of Asia Minor, of Greece, of Italy divided into a hundred little republics, of Gaul, of Spain, of

Africa, of Egypt, with its old national institutions, and their success can no more be thought of, or rather it would seem that their project could never have had birth. The union of the empire was the necessary preliminary condition of all great religious propagandism, placing it above nationalities. The empire recognized this in the fourth century. It became Christian. It saw that Christianity was the religion which it had accepted without knowing it,—the religion limited by its frontiers, identified with it, capable of bringing it a second life.

The Church, on its side, made itself entirely Roman, and has remained to this day a fragment of the empire. During the middle ages the Church was the old Rome, seizing again its authority over the barbarians, imposing on them its decretals, as formerly it had imposed its laws, governing them by its cardinals, as it had before governed through its imperial legates and proconsuls.

In creating its vast empire, Rome imposed, then, the material condition of the propagation of Christianity. She raised up, above all, the moral state which served as an atmosphere and a medium for the new doctrine. While destroying politics everywhere, it created what may be called socialism and religion. At the close of the frightful wars which for some centuries had rent the world, the empire had an era of prosperity and of welfare such as it had never known: we may even be permitted to add (without a paradox) liberty. Liberty of thought, at least, increased under this new *régime*. This liberty is often more prosperous under a king or a prince than under the jealous and narrow-minded plebeian. The ancient republics did not