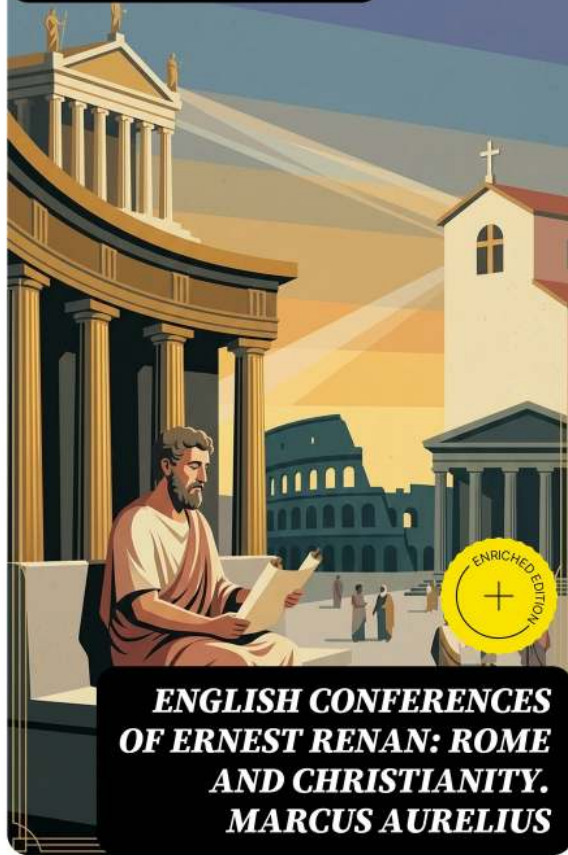


***ERNEST RENAN***



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

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**Ernest Renan**

# **English Conferences of Ernest Renan: Rome and Christianity. Marcus Aurelius**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Olivia Whitlock*

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# Introduction

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English Conferences of Ernest Renan: Rome and Christianity. Marcus Aurelius gathers a compact series of public lectures by the French historian of religions and philologist Ernest Renan, prepared for an English audience and subsequently issued in English. The collection's scope is selective rather than exhaustive: it presents key talks in which Renan probes the relations between the Roman world and the origins of Christianity, culminating in a portrait of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. As a set of intellectual essays shaped by the cadence of oral delivery, these conferences offer an accessible doorway into Renan's mature reflections on faith, power, and historical conscience.

These texts are historical essays originating as spoken addresses. The sequence includes Second Conference: Peter and Paul; Third Conference: Rome the Centre of the Formation of Ecclesiastical Authority; Fourth Conference: Rome, the Capital of Catholicism; an additional Conference; and the Conference at the Royal Institution: Marcus Aurelius. Each piece is argumentative yet meditative, combining the economy of a lecture with the breadth of an essay in religious history. There are no fictional narratives here, but rather interpretive studies and a biographical evocation, composed to be intelligible to general readers while remaining anchored in the disciplines that informed Renan's scholarship.

Across the Rome and Christianity sequence, Renan considers how a small prophetic movement, shaped by the memory of Jesus, engaged the political, administrative, and symbolic centrality of Rome. The examination of Peter and Paul introduces differing apostolic temperaments and missions in relation to the city. The subsequent analyses trace how Rome became a gravitational centre for the formation of ecclesiastical authority and, in time, the capital of Catholicism. The linked materials present premises rather than narratives, focusing on institutions, mentalities, and ideals. Together, they frame the moral and historical problem of authority as lived at the crossroads of empire and church.

Renan's signature method appears throughout: historical criticism guided by philology and a comparative sense of cultures, articulated in lucid, measured prose. He aims neither at apologetic nor at denunciation, but at explaining how beliefs and institutions take shape through time. The lectures balance close attention to texts with larger hypotheses about social organization and moral evolution. A calm tone permits occasional irony without polemic, and the argument remains scrupulous about distinguishing inference from evidence. This stylistic poise—firm in judgment, sparing in ornament—renders complex debates legible to non-specialists while offering specialists a model of synthesis across theology, history, and classical studies.

Because they examine the reciprocal influence of religion and empire, these conferences have retained relevance beyond their moment. Students of early Christianity, Roman history, political thought, and ethics will find in them a clear

map of problems that still animate scholarship: legitimacy, succession, community discipline, and the universal claims of a church within a plural world. Renan's portrait of Marcus Aurelius, placed beside Christian developments, sharpens questions about virtue, conscience, and sovereignty. The collection thus serves as an introduction to debates that helped shape modern historical inquiry, while remaining a concise, self-contained statement of Renan's approach to the past.

Prepared for delivery at the Royal Institution in London, the conferences presume an audience combining curiosity with civility, and they accordingly avoid technical apparatus in favour of intelligible exposition. Their English presentation extended Renan's dialogue with readers beyond France and encouraged a public conversation about the origins of Christian institutions. While shaped by the conditions of a lecture hall, the texts were adapted for print, preserving clarity of argument while permitting refinements of phrasing. The result is a body of work that stands comfortably between oral and written forms, accessible in English while reflecting the scholarship that made Renan influential.

Taken together, these pieces are best read as an ensemble: a progression from apostolic figures to institutional consolidation to a philosophical exemplar outside the Christian fold. Each conference is complete in itself yet gains resonance from its neighbours, and the volume's design highlights their coherence. As an essential selection rather than a comprehensive survey, the collection invites reflection rather than exhaustive cataloguing of

facts. Readers new to Renan will encounter an exacting, humane intelligence; those familiar with his larger studies will recognize the distilled expression of a lifelong inquiry into faith, authority, and the ethical resources of the ancient world.

# Historical Context

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Ernest Renan (1823–1892) brought to his English Conferences of 1880 a mature historical-critical approach forged in the controversies surrounding his *Life of Jesus* (1863) and his suspended then restored chair at the Collège de France (1862, 1870). Delivered at the Royal Institution in London's Albemarle Street, these talks addressed Rome, Christianity, and Marcus Aurelius for an educated Victorian audience accustomed to public science and comparative religion debates. The lectures arose amid the French Third Republic's drive toward *laïcité* and the wider European reassessment of faith after the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), inviting listeners to weigh ecclesiastical claims against philology, history, and the emerging social sciences.

Renan situated Peter and Paul within the first-century Roman imperial framework that made Christianity's spread possible and perilous. The Pax Romana, maritime routes, and a Greco-Roman lingua franca enabled Paul's missions from the 40s to early 60s CE, culminating in his arrival at Rome, recorded in Acts. The Great Fire of 64 and Nero's subsequent persecution supplied the earliest Roman precedent for martyrdoms, later linked to both apostles. Diaspora synagogues, patronage networks, and household assemblies formed the urban cells from which Roman Christianity grew. By highlighting these conditions, Renan emphasized contingency over miracle, a stance both compelling and provocative to Victorian hearers.

In tracing Rome's rise as arbiter of doctrine, Renan drew on second-century witnesses who registered the shift from charismatic communities to episcopal structures. The letter of Clement of Rome (c. 96), Ignatius of Antioch's respect for Rome, and Irenaeus of Lyon's claim around 180 that churches should agree with Rome charted an ascent amid struggles with Gnosticism and Marcionism. The consolidation of a monarchical episcopate, canon formation, and penitential discipline reflected administrative genius sustained by imperial communications. Nineteenth-century epigraphy and patristic editions—Theodor Mommsen's *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (from 1863) and Migne's *Patrologia*—provided Renan tangible evidence for institutional evolution rather than timeless uniformity.

To explain Rome's enduring centrality, Renan invoked turning points from late antiquity through the medieval synthesis. The Edict of Milan (313) granted toleration; Theodosius I made Nicene Christianity the empire's official faith in 380. Amid Western imperial collapse, Roman bishops assumed civic leadership, ultimately shaping alliances with the Franks and culminating in Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800. Medieval claims—bolstered for centuries by the forged Donation of Constantine, exposed by Lorenzo Valla c. 1440—helped secure papal jurisdiction and the Papal States. These precedents clarified how spiritual primacy intertwined with temporal sovereignty, a tension central to Renan's framing of Catholic Rome.

Renan situated modern Catholic authority within post-Reformation centralization and the Counter-Reformation's discipline. The Council of Trent

(1545–1563) codified doctrine and reinforced Roman oversight, while global missions extended papal reach. In the nineteenth century, Ultramontanism advanced strong papal prerogatives, culminating at Vatican I (1869–1870) with the definition of infallibility. That same year, the Risorgimento ended papal temporal rule when Italian troops entered Rome (20 September 1870), and the city became Italy's capital in 1871. Renan read this dual movement—loss of territory, gain of spiritual absolutism—as decisive for understanding Rome's modern authority and the political resonance of his lectures.

In addressing Marcus Aurelius, Renan placed the philosopher-emperor (r. 161–180) within the strains of the Antonine age: frontier wars, fiscal stress, and the Antonine Plague beginning c. 165. Aurelius's *Meditations* exemplified Stoic self-discipline that many nineteenth-century moralists, including Matthew Arnold, admired. Yet under his reign, persecutions occurred sporadically, notably the martyrdoms at Lyon in 177 and the execution of Justin Martyr around 165. Renan contrasted Stoic civic virtue with emergent Christian ecclesial solidarity, suggesting a tragic conflict of two universal moralities. This approach resonated with Victorian ethical debates that sought secular virtue without abandoning religious seriousness.

The lectures were also products of a documentary revolution. Giovanni Battista de Rossi's exploration of the Roman catacombs from the 1840s clarified burial practices and early Christian iconography, while systematic archaeology and numismatics refined imperial chronology. German higher criticism—David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of*

Jesus (1835), Ferdinand Christian Baur's Tübingen school, and historical philology—encouraged source analysis over harmonization. Massive text collections, from the *Patrologia* to inscriptions, opened comparative vistas. Renan leveraged these tools to connect micro-evidence—names, titles, liturgical formulas—with macro-questions of authority and identity, thereby appealing to British empiricism while unsettling confessional certainties.

The English setting shaped reception. Post-Darwin debates, the Anglican crisis after *Essays and Reviews* (1860), and interest in comparative religion made London audiences receptive to Renan's measured skepticism. Catholic commentators, especially after the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) and Vatican I, viewed his historicism as corrosive. In France, Republicans embraced his demystifying narrative as consonant with *laïcité*, while conservative Catholics decried irreverence toward Peter and papal claims. Across Europe after 1870, the search for cultural cohesion—between secular science, national histories, and inherited faiths—framed debates his conferences crystallized, linking Rome's past, present authority, and the moral legacy of Marcus Aurelius.

# Synopsis (Selection)

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## **Rome and Christianity Conferences (CONFERENCE; SECOND CONFERENCE. PETER AND PAUL.; THIRD CONFERENCE. ROME THE CENTRE OF THE FORMATION OF ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY.; FOURTH CONFERENCE. ROME, THE CAPITAL OF CATHOLICISM.)**

A sequence of talks explores the encounter between early Christianity and Roman civilization—from the personalities of Peter and Paul to the city’s rise as the administrative heart of ecclesiastical authority and the capital of Catholicism.

With urbane skepticism and historical analysis, Renan contrasts charismatic origins with institutional consolidation, showing how Rome translated spiritual impulses into durable structures and universal reach.

## **CONFERENCE AT THE ROYAL INSTITUTION. MARCUS AURELIUS.**

This lecture offers a poised portrait of the Stoic emperor, examining how personal virtue and philosophical discipline operate amid the burdens of imperial rule.

Renan shifts from institutional history to moral biography, adopting a lucid, elegiac tone to probe the limits of ethical idealism within a changing religious world.

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