

RECONCILING CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN CULTURE? MARCUS AURELIUS AND
HIS MEDITATIONS IN VICTORIAN SCHOLARSHIP

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To say that the second-century stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius enjoyed a mixed reputation in Victorian scholarship would be an understatement. For liberal Anglican scholars like F.W. Farrar, he was “the holiest of the heathen” (Farrar 1868: 25), the pagan thinker whose thoughts most closely resembled the key tenets of Christianity; for more conservative Christian scholars, he was a “gloomy and fanatical persecutor” of the early Church (Anonymous 1874: 127). He appealed to agnostics like Matthew Arnold as well as to those whose scholarship took a decidedly anti-Christian tone like the translator George Long. Whether the ultimate judgement was positive or negative in nature, the life and *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius could not be ignored.

In the preface to his 1964 translation of the *Meditations*, Maxwell Staniforth remarked upon the cultural prominence of Marcus Aurelius in the years following the translation of the emperor’s writings into English by George Long in 1862. The *Meditations*, he wrote, “quickly became a cultural “must” to the mid-Victorian generation...and during the next forty years the number of its printings and reprintings in different styles and sizes must have been legion”. According to Staniforth, this popularity was “not wholly surprising”; “for it does not need much imagination”, he wrote, “to picture Marcus himself as the very figure of an admired Victorian personage...The grave dignity, the improving sentiments, the earnest piety of the *Meditations* were in the fullest accord with the taste of that era” (Staniforth 1964: 31). These suggestive remarks, however, have been largely passed over by those studying the influence of Rome in Victorian Britain.¹ While Norman Vance observed briefly that “the similarities between [Marcus’s] Stoic meditations and Christian teaching had often been noted” by nineteenth-century commentators like Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, he did not develop a discussion of the point (Vance 1997: 217). This article will investigate Staniforth’s claims further and attempt to explore, through an examination of periodical essays and published works pertaining to Marcus, the role which the stoic emperor played for different elements within Victorian scholarship; of particular pertinence will be the importance placed on the liminal position he occupied between pagan and Christian culture.

GEORGE LONG AND MARCUS AURELIUS

The relative lack of recent scholarly interest in Marcus may partially be explained by the tendency of scholars examining the classical legacy in Victorian Britain to neglect the complex interactions which occurred between the reception of pagan antiquity and contemporary religious beliefs and practices.² Since the appearance of Richard Jenkyns’s study, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*, in 1980, two more major studies of the influence of Greece and Rome in nineteenth-century Britain have appeared along with many other works which have focused on specific aspects of the classical legacy.³ Especial interest has been shown in examining the influence of particular classical writers upon prominent Victorian individuals or movements.⁴ Indeed, the second major study to appear, Frank Turner’s *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*, comprised a number of specific studies of the cultural importance of different classical writers and thinkers including Homer, Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. Moreover, Turner stands out from other scholars of classical reception for his determination to analyse the often complex relationship between these pagan writers and an increasingly fractured Victorian Christianity. Turner’s approach has not, on the whole, been followed by scholars investigating the influence of Roman culture in nineteenth-century Britain. While Norman Vance’s study, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome*, contains a number of valuable essays on the literary importance of individual Latin poets, there is little sustained analysis of their role within the context of Victorian religious and moral beliefs. In a study of the Roman legacy, this is particularly curious as the relationship between paganism and early Christianity under the Roman Empire captured the imagination of many nineteenth-century writers including Edward Bulwer Lytton, Charles Kingsley and John Henry Newman.⁵ Even in Simon Goldhill’s recent study of the relationship between *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*, there is little extended discussion of the relationship between the reception of ancient stoicism and developments within contemporary Victorian religion with Marcus Aurelius and his *Meditations* receiving only a brief mention. With a focus clearly on the reception of

classical antiquity in popular culture and works of fiction, the crucial field of Victorian scholarly writings on the ancient world are somewhat overlooked in this study.⁶

Such comment as there has been about Marcus's importance in the Victorian era has tended to come from modern translators of the *Meditations*, like Maxwell Staniforth, and to assume that he was a wholly positive figure for Victorian scholars. Staniforth maintained, indeed, that, as a character, Marcus embodied the qualities of the ideal Victorian. In the preface to his 1964 translation, this positive image of Marcus was firmly linked with George Long's presentation of the emperor in his 1862 translation. Long was, Staniforth declared, the "first man to bring a wide public under the spell of Marcus Aurelius" (Staniforth 1964: 31). Although several new translations of the *Meditations* into English⁷ had appeared since the edition produced by Meric Casaubon in 1634, including those by Richard Graves (1792), and Henry McCormac (1844), the standard translation of the *Meditations* before Long's remained that by Jeremy Collier, published in 1701. Collier was introduced in Matthew Arnold's 1863 essay, "Marcus Aurelius", as Long's "best-known predecessor" and the man through whom "most English people...knew Marcus Aurelius before Mr. Long appeared as his introducer" (Arnold 1863: 221). There were writers and scholars, both in England and abroad, especially in France and Germany, who had paid some attention to Marcus and the *Meditations*, but none of these proved as popular as Long's translation and commentaries.⁸ It is equally true that Long's portrayal of Marcus was a very positive one which he would have liked his contemporaries to emulate. In the two essays which accompanied the translation, he emphasized, above all, the emperor's active spirit and practical talents, precisely the qualities he felt to be lacking in mid-Victorian England. Marcus was, he wrote, "one of the best and bravest" of human beings (Long 1908: 40) and his *Meditations* one of the works best "fitted to form the character of a soldier and a man" (Long 1908: 32). Long concluded his discussion of Marcus's contemporary relevance with these words:

Fine thoughts and moral dissertations from men who have not worked and suffered may be read but they will be forgotten...The emperor [Marcus Aurelius] Antoninus was a practical moralist...His subject [wa]s Ethic, and Ethic in its practical application to his own conduct in life as a man and as a governor (Long 1908: 39).

However, at the same time, it seems unlikely that Long was aiming at the kind of popularity with which Staniforth credited him. From one of the essays accompanying the translation, the reader learns that Long had "used" the *Meditations* privately "for many years" and had originally intended the translation merely for his own use (Long 1908: 30). Even Matthew Arnold, Long's largely favourable reviewer, questioned whether the translator intended his work to be a popular one. Frustrated by what he considered his overly idiosyncratic style, Arnold concluded that a lack of "idiom" and "simplicity" hindered Long's ability to achieve the "aim" which he felt any translator of the *Meditations* "should have in view", namely that of making "Marcus Aurelius's work as popular as the *Imitation* and [his] name as familiar as Socrates" (Arnold 1863: 222).

There is, moreover, evidence to suggest that Long's work was not indeed as popular as Staniforth claimed. In 1869, E.H. Plumptre, Professor of Theology at King's College, London, failed to include Long's name in a summary of recent scholarship credited with bringing Marcus before the public imagination with "a new distinctness". This summary went back as far as 1853 and included names as famous as those of F.D. Maurice and Long's own reviewer, Matthew Arnold (Plumptre 1869: 81). Indeed, it will be contended that Long's views about Marcus, particularly those pertaining to his relations with Christianity, found little favour with an important strand of scholarly opinion in mid-Victorian England represented by Plumptre. In particular, Long maintained that Marcus's stoicism was equal to Christianity in its ability to console its followers. In his essay, "The Philosophy of Antoninus", which accompanied the first edition of his translation in 1862, he criticized the emphasis which other scholars had placed on Marcus's "need of consolation and comfort in life, and even to prepare him to meet his death" (Long 1908: xlii). It was true, Long admitted, that the emperor had needed "comfort and support", but it was equally true that he had "found it" (Long 1908: 41). Second century stoics, wrote Long, were capable of producing prayers to God "which no Christian could improve" (Long 1908: 31). In an attempt to explain his position, he declared: "I would have all men think as they please, or as they can and I only claim the same freedom which I give"

(Long 1908: 48). For Long, intellectual and religious freedom was of paramount importance and he claimed the figure of Marcus as an ally in this point of view. "A man's true greatness", he wrote,

lies in the consciousness of an honest purpose in life, founded on...frequent self-examination, and a steady obedience to the rule which he knows to be right, without troubling himself, as the emperor says he should not, about what others may think or say, or whether they do or do not do that which he thinks and says and does. (Long 1908: 32)

Despite his pleas for tolerance, however, Long displayed a clear hostility towards Christianity. He described the religion in Marcus's day as "grossly corrupted" (Long 1908: 31) with "many fanatical and ignorant" followers (Long 1908: 26). His opinion of "extant ecclesiastical histories" was equally negative, condemning them as "manifestly falsified" and "grossly exaggerated" (Long 1908: 26). He used accusations like these to challenge the widely held belief that Marcus had persecuted Christians during his reign. He maintained that the "true cause of the persecutions" was "the fanaticism of the populace" and he was keen to suggest that Marcus "would have been willing to let the Christians alone" if such a thing had been in his power. "It would be a great mistake", he wrote, "to suppose that Antoninus had...unlimited authority...His power was limited by certain constitutional forms, by the senate, and by the precedents of his predecessors. We cannot admit that such a man was an active persecutor, for there is no evidence that he was." (Long 1908: 26-7)

SEEKER AFTER GOD: MARCUS AURELIUS AND LIBERAL ANGLICAN SCHOLARSHIP

The summary of scholarship drawn up by Plumptre in 1869 represented a vision of Marcus very different from Long's, focusing not upon the religious self-sufficiency of the emperor, but upon his yearning for a system more spiritually fulfilling than stoicism. Plumptre began his summary with the 1853 treatise on *Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy* by F.D. Maurice. "Mr. Maurice", he wrote, "has, with his usual insight, led us to sympathise with...the profound sense of the need...of a Divine Guide, which characterise[s] the "Self-Communings." Matthew Arnold's 1863 essay was also singled out for approval; contemplation of Marcus's character had, apparently for the first time, Plumptre wrote, freed Arnold from his self-important role as the champion of culture and caused him, in the course of the essay, to seek, like the emperor himself, "something above the "sweetness and light" on which he commonly lavishe[d] his praise". The final scholar to be mentioned was F.W. Farrar, who was commended for according Marcus a prominent place in his appropriately titled 1868 volume, *Seekers After God* (Plumptre 1869: 81).

F.D. Maurice was perhaps the earliest Victorian scholar to focus attention on what he perceived as Marcus's yearning for greater spiritual satisfaction. In his *Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy* of 1853, he presented the emperor as seeking religious truth "from every...quarter, as well as from the teachers of the Porch" (Maurice 1853: 32). Maurice identified the reason for this constant searching in the failure of stoicism to infuse Marcus's conception of the divine with sufficient emotion and joy. "At times", he wrote, there was "a coldness to [the emperor's] speculations; the man seems in danger of being lost in the universe" (Maurice 1853: 35). While Matthew Arnold, by contrast, saw in the *Meditations* "something of [the] very sentiment whence Christian morality draws its best power" (Arnold 1863: 220), he too viewed Marcus as a frustrated figure, "agitated, stretching out his arms for something beyond" (Arnold 1863: 241). Farrar also stressed the strong similarities to Christianity which the *Meditations* exhibited. "Can all antiquity", he asked, "show anything tenderer than this, or anything more close to the spirit of Christian teaching?" (Farrar 1868: 14) Yet, for all this, he too noticed a "deep unutterable melancholy" in Marcus's writings (12). Plumptre himself shared this view of the emperor. Like the scholars whose work he highlighted, he thought that the naturally kind Marcus had suffered under a philosophy which "aimed at an aristocracy of the intellect, and had no bond of brotherhood" with one's fellow human beings (Plumptre 1869: 94).

With the exception of Arnold who confessed himself unable to believe in the reality of God, the other writers in this group shared a distinct religious and intellectual background. Maurice was Professor of Theology at King's College, London from 1846 until 1853 when he was asked to resign over his controversial *Theological Essays* published in the same year. Plumptre was a chaplain (and later Professor of Theology) at King's College from 1847 and formed a close friendship with Maurice during his

time there; he was later also to become his brother-in-law. Farrar, the youngest of the three men, came as a student to King's in 1847 where he established ties with both Maurice and Plumptre. Despite the fact that neither Farrar nor Plumptre came to share Maurice's explicitly Christian socialist views, both men sympathized deeply with his desire to liberalize the Anglican Church and make it an instrument of visible social reform. Marcus Aurelius offered himself as a sympathetic figurehead for their campaign to reach out to people who felt excluded from traditional Anglicanism: a pagan ruler admired through the centuries for his Christ-like virtue and his honest striving to discover the true nature of God. The message which Maurice, Plumptre and Farrar sought to communicate was a simple one, namely that God's love was available to all those who truly sought him and tried to live justly. In Plumptre's words, Marcus's life "serve[d] to illustrate the law that "God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him" (Plumptre 1869: 81). Maurice likewise maintained that Marcus's pagan status was no bar against his receiving part of God's truth. "Those who believe", he wrote, that the Christian Church is

a society established by God...for all human beings will...dare not conceal or misrepresent, or undervalue, any one of those weighty and memorable sentences which are to be found in the meditations of Marcus Aurelius. If they did, they would be undervaluing a portion of that very truth which the preachers of the Gospel were appointed to set forth (Maurice 1853: 37).

Farrar struck a similar note. Calling Marcus the "holiest of the heathen", he insisted that the emperor's "virtues" were due to the "indwelling spirit" of Christ, the saviour whom he "ignorantly and unconsciously...worshipped, and whom had he ever heard of Him and known Him, he would have loved in his heart and glorified by the consistency of his noble and stainless life" (Farrar 1868: 25). Farrar too assured his readers that Marcus's place in heaven was guaranteed by the purity of his character and his honest striving after a more spiritually satisfying religion. There "never passed into the presence of [the] Heavenly Father", he wrote, "a nobler, a gentler, a purer, a sweeter soul...a soul more fitted by virtue, and chastity, and self-denial to enter into the eternal peace" (Farrar 1868: 26).

In one respect, however, the scholars highlighted by Plumptre were similar to Long in their presentation of Marcus. They emphasized the same active, dynamic personality. Maurice, for example, held that Marcus, as a true Roman, only studied philosophy "that he might more effectually carry on the business of an Emperor" (Maurice 1853: 32). Farrar agreed. For him, Marcus's remarkable "hardiness" provided a valuable paradigm of active physical manliness for "those boys of our day, who think it undignified to travel second-class, who dress in the extreme of fashion, wear roses in their buttonholes, and spend upon ices and strawberries what would maintain a poor man for a year". Marcus's example, he continued, would teach them "how infinitely more noble was the abstinence of this young Roman, who though born in the midst of splendour and luxury, learnt from the first to...despise the unmanliness of self-indulgence" (Farrar 1868: 5). Plumptre too emphasized Marcus's practical skills and strong sense of duty. His reign, he declared, was not that of an "eclectic dilettanti [sic] like Alexander Severus, or a reactionary dreamer...like Julian". Marcus proved himself at a time "when the reins of Empire required to be held with a strong hand, when barbarous tribes...were hovering threateningly on the frontier, when the finances and judicial administration of the provinces required the most watchful handling" (Plumptre 1869: 82). Arnold likewise highlighted Marcus's energy and practical talents. "For all men who "drive at practice", he wrote, "what practical rules may one not accumulate out of these *Meditations*?" (Arnold 1853: 231) Arnold, moreover, was the only writer mentioned by Plumptre to acknowledge the fact that in highlighting Marcus's practical character he had something in common with Long. "That for which I...may venture to praise Mr. Long", he wrote, "is this, that he treats Marcus Aurelius's writings...not as food for schoolboys, but as food for men, and men engaged in the current of contemporary life and action." Marcus himself, wrote Arnold approvingly, was treated by Long as "a truly modern striver and thinker...a present source from which to draw example of life, and instruction of manners". Furthermore, by likening Long's technique to the approach of his own father, the liberal Anglican headmaster and Roman historian, Thomas Arnold, he made explicit the link between Long's presentation of an active, dynamic Marcus and a tradition of liberal Anglican scholarship which encouraged the study of men of practical ability and contemporary relevance in the writing of history (Arnold 1853: 220). This was a link which Plumptre in his 1869 summary

was either ignorant of or merely reluctant to acknowledge given the significant religious differences which separated him from Long.

THE DARLING OF AGNOSTICISM

While the mid nineteenth century saw Marcus Aurelius praised by liberal Anglican scholars as a humble “seeker after God”, in its later decades he came to inspire a number of prominent writers who found it increasingly difficult to believe in the existence of God at all. As F.W.H. Myers wrote in his 1882 essay, “Marcus Aurelius Antoninus”,

The present age, [with its] high aims and uncertain creed [has] found at once impulse and sympathy in the meditations of the crowned philosopher...[H]e has been made...the saint and exemplar of Agnosticism, the type of all such virtue and wisdom as modern criticism can allow to be sound or permanent. (Myers 1882: 564)

Marcus's thoughts, Myers explained, were “more emotional and agnostic than would have satisfied Chrysippus or Zeno...Even the fundamental Stoic belief in God and Providence is not beyond question in [his] eyes.” As evidence of this, he offered two passages from the *Meditations* (Book IX, ch. 28):

Either confusion and entanglement and scattering again: or unity, order, providence. If the first case be, why do I wish to live amid the clashings of chance and chaos? or care for aught else but to become earth myself at last? And why am I disturbed, since this dispersion will come whatever I do? but if the latter case be the true one, I reverence and stand firm, and trust in him who rules.

Thus wags the world, up and down, from age to age. And either the universal mind determines each event; and if so, accept then that which it determines; or it has ordained once and for all, and the rest follows in sequence; or indivisible elements are the origin of all things. In a word, if there be a god, then all is well; if all things go at random, act not at random thou.

“This speculative openness”, declared Myers, was “so much more sympathetic to the modern reader than the rhetoric of Seneca or even the lofty dogmatism of Epictetus.” (Myers 1882: 572-3). While the *Meditations* had indeed been translated before, “the complete success of the book”, Myers declared, “was reserved for the present century” (Myers 1882: 569). So how important was this view of Marcus which Myers considered so dominant by 1882, and where did it originate? According to R.H. Hutton, the term “Agnosticism” was first coined by T.H. Huxley at Cambridge in the spring of 1869 (*New English Dictionary* 86). It did not, however, gain widespread acceptance until the early 1880s when the *Agnostic Annual* was set up by Charles A. Watts. Writing to Watts in 1883, Huxley said he had meant the term “Agnostic” to denote “people who, like myself, confess themselves to be hopelessly ignorant concerning a variety of matters, about which metaphysicians and theologians, both orthodox and heterodox, dogmatise with utmost confidence” (Huxley 1879: 9).

Although it was impossible that Arnold had been familiar with the term “Agnosticism” when he wrote his article about Marcus in 1863, it seems likely that Myers traced Marcus's role as the “saint” of Agnosticism back beyond Huxley's coining of the term in 1869 to Arnold's earlier essay on the emperor. Myers had, after all, highlighted Marcus's popularity with “modern criticism”; and there was no English critic with an interest in the stoic emperor more famous than Arnold. Myers had been corresponding privately with Arnold from at least 1875 and had replicated points which Arnold had made in his essay on Marcus in his own article of 1882.⁹ Moreover, Arnold's own description of Marcus has much in it which is reminiscent of Huxley's definition of an “agnostic” given some six years later in 1869: “the especial friend and comforter of all clear-headed and scrupulous, yet pure-hearted and upward-striving men, in those ages most especially that walk by sight, not by faith and yet have no open vision” (Arnold 1863: 240). As if to sharpen the effect of his point about the similarity between Marcus's philosophy and Christianity, Arnold deliberately inverts the famous quotation by St Paul, ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Corinthians 5:7) and draws on 1 Samuel 3:1 for the phrase ‘no open vision’. That Arnold depicts Marcus here as the agnostic's ‘friend and comforter’ in no way contradicts the opinion which Plumptre correctly ascribed to him, namely that Marcus was searching for a philosophy of life more spiritually satisfying than stoicism. For, as

becomes clear in the course of the essay, Marcus, as Arnold perceived him, was far from happy with this state of scepticism and religious uncertainty. In this respect, Arnold wrote, he was typical of many contemporary Victorians who had lost their faith in Christianity. Marcus's philosophy could never, he argued, "give such souls...all they yearn for", but what he was able to give them, they could at least receive (Arnold 1863: 240).

However, it was not Arnold to whom Myers drew most attention in his essay, but rather, the French critic, Ernest Renan, who had published his monograph *Marc-Aurèle et la Fin du Monde Antique* the previous year in 1881. "I will quote", Myers wrote, "one passage only as showing the position which [the *Meditations*] has taken among some schools of modern thought." The passage chosen was from Renan's book, and, in it, according to Myers, the French critic described the *Meditations* "in terms of more unmixed eulogy than he has ever bestowed elsewhere" (Myers 1882: 569). "A veritable eternal Gospel", wrote Renan, "the *Meditations*

will never grow old; for [they affirm] no dogma. The [Christian] Gospel has aged in some portions [and] science does not permit any longer the admission of the artless conception of the supernatural which makes its basis...Science may destroy God and the soul, while the [Meditations remain] young yet in life and truth. The religion of Marcus-Aurelius...is... absolute religion--that which results from the simple fact of a high moral conscience placed face to face with the universe...No revolution, no advance, no discovery, can change it (Renan 1890: 156).

It is clear from this passage that Renan shared Arnold's opinion that Marcus was particularly attractive to those who had lost faith in Christian doctrines and dogma. In an essay entitled "Marc-Aurèle" published in *The Nineteenth Century* in May 1880, he offered an earlier and yet strikingly similar description of the *Meditations* as "this Gospel of those who do not believe in the supernatural, who have only been well understood in our present age". For "the virtue of Marcus Aurelius [is] like our own", he declared, "based on reason and on nature" (Renan 1880: 755).¹⁰ As a man who had himself struggled at length (and had ultimately failed) to reconcile the Catholic faith of his youth with the deeply-held conviction, developed during his later education, that science was able to explain the mysteries of the universe, the figure of Marcus held a particular attraction for Renan.

It is also important to note that agnostic scholars like Renan and Myers concurred in the emphasis which their liberal Anglican counterparts had placed on Marcus's energy and practical talents. Renan directed his 1880 essay against those "historians...who have sought to prove that a man so refined was a poor administrator and a mediocre sovereign". In answer to them he gave this account of Marcus's career:

Never was a reign so fruitful in reforms and progress. The programme of state assistance, founded by Nerva and Trajan, witnessed admirable developments under Marcus...Those overseeing the distribution of free food became officials of the first order and were chosen with great care. There was [even] provision made for the education of poor women (Renan 1880: 745).¹¹

So highly did Renan think of Marcus's practical achievements that he declared that it was during his reign that "the principle that the state had certain paternal duties towards its citizens...was proclaimed for the first time in the world" (Renan 1880: 745).¹² Myers was similarly hostile to writers who presented Marcus as "a closet philosopher moralising *in vacuo*" (Myers 1882: 564). The emperor's private studies, he wrote, in no way "impaired his activity as an administrator" or prevented him from spending countless hours in "long adjudications" and "ceaseless battles", "strenuous[ly] ordering...the concerns of the Roman world" (Myers 1882: 569-70).

GLOOMY PERSECUTOR: MARCUS AURELIUS IN CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

Not all reception of Marcus was so positive, however. With the growth of religious scepticism in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, a reaction, and with it, a very different view of the stoic emperor was generated

among scholars who continued to maintain the historical accuracy of the Bible. As the American writer Paul Barron Watson wrote in his 1884 life of Marcus: It became “the fashion among...Christian writers who...treat[ed] of Marcus’s reign” to represent the emperor as a “cruel persecutor” whose behaviour in this regard was attributable to the simple fact that he was “a stranger to the doctrines of Jesus Christ” (Watson 1884: 258). One of the earliest and most important exponents of this opinion was the Roman historian and long-serving Dean of Ely, Charles Merivale. Although a liberal theologian in his youth, Merivale’s views had become markedly more conservative by the time his thoughts on Marcus were first published in the same year as Long’s translation, 1862.¹³ Here they formed part of volume VII of his most famous work, *A History of the Romans under the Empire*, but they appeared again, abridged, but virtually unaltered in his 1875 *A General History of Rome from the Foundation of the City to the Fall of Augustulus BC753-AD476*.

In a review of volume VII of his 1862 *History of the Romans under the Empire*, W.B. Donne began by praising Merivale as an “impartial chronicler of the Caesars” (Donne 1864: 26). However, when he came to discuss the presentation of Marcus Aurelius, his tone changed distinctly. While Merivale still received credit for making “due allowance for...the various calamities” which affected the later years of the emperor’s reign, Donne complained that the period was presented to readers as “an era of gloom and dismay”. “A sense of languor, if not despair, comes over us,” he wrote (Donne 1864: 59). When Merivale’s text itself is considered, it is clear that he had no particularly high regard for Marcus. Hadrian was his favourite Caesar, mainly, it seems, because he was everything which, to Merivale’s mind at least, Marcus was not. “I am disposed, he wrote,

to regard the reign of Hadrian as the best of the imperial series, marked by endeavours at reform and improvement in every department of administration...[Hadrian] reminds us more than any other Roman...of what, we proudly style the thorough English gentleman...His countenance expresses ability rather than genius, lively rather than deep feelings, wide and general sympathies rather than concentrated thought...The sensual predominates in him over the ideal, the flesh over the spirit; he is...a man of taste rather than a philosopher.

According to these criteria, Marcus, as Merivale presented him, was certainly no model of “the thorough English gentleman” (Merivale 1870: 392-3). In the preface to his 1875 *General History of Rome*, a “morbid self-inspection” was presented as Marcus’s defining trait (Merivale 1875: x). The stoic emperor was, he wrote, “little fitted for the active duties to which he was...called”, believing, as he did, what Merivale termed Plato’s “splendid fallacy”, that the best kings are philosophers (Merivale 1875: 541). In Merivale’s estimation, Marcus remained “a recluse philosopher” (Merivale 1875: 545) with “no special talent for command” (Merivale 1875: 543).

This lack of respect for Marcus’s practical ability was matched by the blame which Merivale attached to the emperor for the sufferings of Christians during his reign. “The cruel persecution[s] which he permitted and even enjoined”, he declared, “can have had no other origin than the panic terror which he shared equally with his people” (Merivale 1875: 542). In Merivale’s *History*, Marcus was a superstitious follower of pagan cults, the very opposite of the “holiest...heathen” which liberal Anglican scholars like Farrar considered him to be. For Merivale, the story of Marcus’s reign was that of the decline of pagan civilisation and the inevitable triumph of Christianity. In the end, he wrote, “the fastidious pride of the Roman philosopher could not brook the simple creed on which the Christian leaned” (Merivale 1875: 545). With what must surely be a deliberate swipe at Edward Gibbon (whose *Decline and Fall* famously depicted the Antonines as representing the apex of ancient civilisation before the triumph of Christianity), Merivale declared in the preface to his *General History*, “With the age of the Antonines commences the dissolution of ancient society, and the wonderful transmutation of ideas which issued in the general reception of the Christian religion” (Merivale 1875: xi).

Nor was Merivale alone in propounding this opinion of Marcus’s life and times. A number of articles in non-conformist periodicals gave even harsher assessments of the emperor. An anonymous 1875 review of Albert Forbiger’s *Hellas und Rom* in the Methodist journal, the *London Quarterly Review*, condemned Marcus as “a gloomy and fanatical persecutor of men” not only “by State necessity but by a vindictive enmity to the Christian faith” (Anonymous 1874: 127). Like Merivale, whose work he quoted liberally, the author of this article viewed Marcus’s reign as an “age of declining civilisation” (Anonymous

1874: 126) destined to be “so soon and so entirely vanquished and swept away by the simple truths of the Gospel” (Anonymous 1874: 152). Another strongly worded essay with similar views appeared in the Congregationalist periodical, the *British Quarterly Review*, in January 1883. Reviewing Renan’s 1881 *Marc-Aurèle et la Fin du Monde Antique*, W.F. Adeney, Professor of New Testament Exegesis and Church History at Lancashire College, Manchester, condemned its author and Agnosticism more generally, for “declin[ing] to admit the Divine origin and lofty claims of the religion of the New Testament” (Adeney 1883: 1). Although he admitted that Renan, like other agnostics, had a degree of “emotional sympathy” (Adeney 1883: 3) with Christianity, “the objective truth of religion”, he complained, “is with M. Renan a matter of very little importance” (Adeney 1883: 28). He too blamed Marcus for the persecutions which took place during his reign. “Marcus Aurelius persecuted Christianity”, he wrote, “with a severity hitherto unknown.” “Thus far”, he continued, “persecution had been originated by the people, and in consequence it had been local, spasmodic, transitory. Now it [was] taken up by the government and carried out on system, and new cruelties of torture [were] added” (Adeney 1883: 15). Adeney also joined Merivale in attacking Marcus’s deep interest in philosophy. “He delighted in meditative retirement”, he wrote, and was, as a result, “less vigorous in action” than his predecessor Antoninus Pius whom Adeney praised as “that happy combination of the saint, the philosopher, and the man of action” (Adeney 1883: 5).

Similar criticisms of Marcus were made at the same time by less conventional defenders of Christianity. John Coates, for example, has argued persuasively that Walter Pater’s presentation of Marcus in his 1885 novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, was conceived, at least in part, as a critique of Renan’s positive assessment of the emperor’s scepticism in *Marc-Aurèle et la Fin du Monde Antique*. Thus, according to Coates, “Pater”, when tackling the thorny issue of Christian persecutions, “brushe[d] aside Renan’s numerous excuses and justifications”, calling it a “fatal mistake” of Marcus’s, responsibility for which, must lie entirely with “the emperor himself” (Coates 2000: 420). In *Marius*, the novel most commonly seen as marking its author’s tentative *rapprochement* with Christianity, Pater certainly replicated many of the criticisms made by scholars such as Merivale and Adeney. Marcus was, for instance, accused of preferring the life of a reclusive thinker to that of a man of action. He was likened to a “hermit of the middle age” (Pater 1885: 201) with his “ascetic pride” (Pater 1885: 200), hatred for the body (Pater 1885: 53) and singular sadness (Pater 1885: 48). Christianity, by contrast, embodied by Pater in *Marius*’s friend Cornelius, was defined by “the joy...the serenity, the durable cheerfulness, of those who have been...delivered” from the fear of death (Pater 1885: 53).

In the course of this article, the reception of Marcus Aurelius in Victorian scholarship has been considered in a variety of situations. Mid-Victorian liberal Anglicans such as Maurice, Farrar and Plumptre certainly admired him for what they considered his Christian-like morality and his longing for a higher spiritual life. Viewed in this way he became particularly useful as a medium through which to appeal to those who felt excluded from traditional Anglicanism. On the other hand, the importance which Marcus had placed on reason and his ultimate failure to achieve certainty in spiritual matters made him the darling of late-nineteenth-century Agnosticism. He appealed not only to proud and confident sceptics like Renan, but also to distressed souls like Matthew Arnold who yearned for the certainty which Christianity promised but could not bring themselves to accept what they saw as its irrational features. Marcus’s positive appeal was perhaps best summed up by Renan when he declared that “everyone from the atheist...to the man who is most deeply engaged in the beliefs of a particular religion can find edification” in the *Meditations*. “It is”, he wrote, “the most thoroughly human book we possess” (Renan 1880: 748).¹⁴

However, while Marcus’s positive appeal was significant and broad, his reception was by no means wholly favourable. In the mid-Victorian period, Long’s work on the emperor (which has since been credited with sparking his popularity in the nineteenth century) was omitted from a contemporary summary of the most important Marcus scholarship because, this article has suggested, Long had dared to portray the emperor as a rationalist opponent of Christianity. In the later nineteenth century, Marcus appeared once again at the centre of a debate between agnostic scholars like Renan and conservative Christian writers, both Anglican and non-conformist, who believed that the study of his reign should be left to those who were both “scholars” and “divines” (Donne 1864: 61). In response to accounts which praised Marcus for his rationalism and religious scepticism, scholars like Merivale and Adeney portrayed the emperor as a reclusive, melancholic philosopher, insensitive to all but his own pain. The liminal position which Marcus

occupied in the Victorian imagination between classical and Christian culture was precisely what made his life and writings such compelling subject matter for so wide a range of writers. Moreover, it is only by investigating the complex and often contradictory reception of figures like Marcus that scholars today can fully appreciate the important connections which linked the study of pagan antiquity closely with the major themes of Victorian religious debate.

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¹ P.H. Clarke has considered the influence of Marcus Aurelius' philosophy upon Adam Smith in *Adam Smith and the Stoics: the influence of Marcus Aurelius* (Bristol, 1996). In the introduction to a 2008 re-issue of the 1742 translation of the *Meditations* (by James Moor and Francis Hutcheson), the editors James Moore and Michael Silverthorne examine the eighteenth-century reception of Marcus Aurelius and his writings. See *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, trans. Francis Hutcheson and James Moor, edited and with an Introduction by James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008). Jill Kraye has also looked at the early-modern reception of Marcus in Jill Kraye, 'Ethnicorum omnium sanctissimus: Marcus Aurelius and his *Meditations* from Xylander to Diderot' in Jill Kraye and M.W.F. Stone eds., *Humanism and Early Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 107-34. The only works which look in detail at Marcus' influence in the nineteenth century are John Coates, 'Renan and Pater's Marius the Epicurean', *Comparative Literature Studies* 37 (2000): 402-423 and Henry Ebel, 'Matthew Arnold and Marcus Aurelius,' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* vol. 3, No. 4, *Nineteenth Century* (Autumn, 1963), pp. 555-566. These articles are limited respectively to an examination of the influence of Marcus Aurelius upon the development of Arnold's thought and to an assessment of the influence of Arnold and Renan's presentations of Marcus upon Pater's portrayal in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).

² An exception here is Lee Behlman's *Faithful unto Death: The Postures of Victorian Stoicism* (University of Michigan, 2000) which does examine the reception of stoic philosophy in the Victorian period. This is, however, primarily a philosophical study with relatively little attention paid to the relationship between stoicism and Christianity in nineteenth-century scholarship.

³ Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (London, 1981), Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1997). Examples of works dealing with particular aspects of classical reception include G.W. Clarke (ed.), *Rediscovering Hellenism: the Hellenic Inheritance and the English Imagination* (Cambridge, 1989), Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen: the Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London, 2000) and Barbara Goff (ed.), *Classics and Colonialism* (London, 2005).

⁴ Examples include Kyriacos N. Demetriou, *George Grote on Plato and Athenian Democracy: A Study in Classical Reception* (Frankfurt, 1999) and D.W. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford, 2004).

⁵ Edward George G.L. Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (London, 1834), Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia; or, New Foes with an Old Face* (London, 1853), John Henry Newman, *Callista: a Sketch of the Third Century* (London, 1855).

⁶ Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Oxford, 2011). Simon Goldhill does discuss various connections between classical antiquity and Victorian religion, (particularly in the context of religious justifications of imperial exploration in chapter 5), but he rarely links Victorian writing and scholarship on ancient philosophy and religion with developments in contemporary Victorian religion.

⁷ Following Casaubon (1634), there appeared English translations of the *Meditations* by Jeremy Collier (1701), Francis Hutcheson and James Moor (1742), James Thomson (1747), Richard Graves (1792) and Henry McCormac (1844). The translation by Moor and Hutcheson has recently been re-issued by the Liberty Fund (2008), edited and with an introduction by James Moore and Michael Silverthorne. The introduction to this volume gives more information on the eighteenth-century reception of Marcus Aurelius. For more details about the various editions of the *Meditations* which appeared between those of Casaubon and Long, see John Wickham Legg, 'A Bibliography of the Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus', *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 10 (1908-9), 15-81.

⁸ The translation which appeared most recently before Long's was Alexis Pierron's *Marc-Aurèle, Pensées Pour Moi-même* (Paris, 1845), which was accompanied by an introductory essay entitled 'La Vie de Marc-Aurèle' by Mario Meunier. The most recent scholarly commentaries were Edouard de Suckau, *Etude sur Marc-Aurèle, sa vie et sa doctrine* (Paris, 1857) and Nicolaus Bach, 'De Marco Aurelio Antonino imperatore philosophante ex ipsius commentariis scriptio philologica' (Leipzig, 1826) whose assistance Long acknowledged in his own translation. For this see George Long, *The Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius* (London, 1908), p. 39. Other scholars in England who paid attention to Marcus and his *Meditations* before the appearance of Long's translation include Thomas Gataker who produced an edition of the *Meditations* in the original Greek in 1652 and Walter Savage Landor who wrote a verse-dialogue between Marcus Aurelius and Lucian included in his *Hellenics* (1846); see also Frederick Denison Maurice, *Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy: the first six centuries* (London, 1853), pp. 31-37 and John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859) in Stefan Collini (ed.), *On Liberty and other writings* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 28-30. For more information on Marcus Aurelius scholarship before Long, see Krayer, 'Ethnicorum omnium sanctissimus', pp. 107-34.

⁹ For example, both Myers and Arnold compare the pagan view of the early Christians with nineteenth century perceptions of Mormonism. On this see Arnold, 'Marcus Aurelius', p. 228. It should be pointed out that J.S. Mill also makes this comparison in *On Liberty* in Collini (ed.), *On Liberty and Other Writings*, p. 91.

¹⁰ 'Cet Évangil de ceux qui ne croient pas au surnaturel, qui n'a pu être bien compris de nos jours...La vertu de Marc-Aurèle, comme la nôtre, repose sur la raison, sur la nature.'

¹¹ 'Mais jamais règne ne fut plus fécond en réformes et en progrès. L'assistance publique, fondée par Nerva et Trajan, reçut de lui d'admirables développemnets. Des collèges nouveaux pour l'éducation gratuite furent établis; les procureurs alimentaires devinrent des fonctionnaires de premier ordre et furent choisis avec un soin extrême; on pourvut à l'éducation des femmes pauvres...'

¹² 'Le principe que l'État a des devoirs en quelque sorte paternels envers ses membres...a été proclamé pour la première fois dans le monde.'

¹³ For example, Merivale supported the controversial Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874 which was designed to check the popularity of ritualism within the Anglican Church.

¹⁴ 'Tous, depuis l'athée...jusqu' à l'homme le plus engagé dans les croyances particulières de chaque culte, peuvent y trouver des fruits d'édification. C'est le livre le plus purement humain qu'il y ait.'