

**Franz Overbeck: A Review of Recent Literature (Part 2): *ITQ***, vol. 73, 2008, 174-191.

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The second part of this review article looks at the coherence of Franz Overbeck's (1837-1905) critique of Christianity and its theology. It considers Overbeck's intellectual and personal context in the post-Enlightenment world of the nineteenth century, and seeks to respond in some measure to the searching questions he posed to the Christian tradition.

**KEYWORDS:** Karl Barth, Tübingen School, Hegelianism, secular, Nietzsche

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 1: Schriften bis 1873.** By Franz Overbeck. Edited by Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Niklaus Peter, in collaboration with Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1994. Pp. X+337. Price €49.90. ISBN 3-476-00962-9.

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 2: Schriften bis 1880.** By Franz Overbeck. Edited by Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Rudolf Brändle, in collaboration with Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1994. Pp. IX+576. Price €69.90. ISBN 3-476-00963-7.

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 4: Kirchenlexicon Texte. Ausgewählte Artikel A-I.** By Franz Overbeck. Edited by Barbara von Reibnitz, in collaboration with Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1995. Pp. XLIV+692. Price €79.90. ISBN 3-476-00965-3.

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 5: Kirchenlexicon Texte. Ausgewählte Artikel J-Z.** By Franz Overbeck. Edited by Barbara von Reibnitz, in collaboration with Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1995. Pp. XX+762. Price €79.90. ISBN 3-476-00966-1.

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 6/1: Kirchenlexicon. Materialien. »Christentum und Kultur.«** By Franz Overbeck. Edited by Barbara von Reibnitz. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1996. Pp. X+345. Price €64.90. ISBN 3-476-00967-X.

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 6/2: Kirchenlexicon. Materialien. Gesamtinventar.** By Franz Overbeck. Prepared and edited by Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub, in collaboration with Barbara von Reibnitz. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1997. Pp. IX+388. Price €64.90. ISBN 3-476-00968-8.

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 7/1: Autobiographisches. »Mich selbst betreffend.«** By Franz Overbeck. Edited by Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub and Mathias Stauffacher. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2002. Pp. LXXV+390. Price €84.90. ISBN 3-476-00969-6.

**Werke und Nachlaß. Band 7/2: Autobiographisches. »Meine Freunde Treitschke, Nietzsche and Rohde.«** By Franz Overbeck. Edited by Barbara von Reibnitz and Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub. Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1999. Pp. LVII+347. Price €69.90. ISBN 3-476-01615-3.<sup>1</sup>

**Der Geist der Historie und das Ende des Christentums. Zur „Waffengenossenschaft“ von Friedrich Nietzsche und Franz Overbeck. Mit einem Anhang unpublizierter Texte aus Overbecks „Kirchenlexicon“.** By

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth the volumes of this critical edition of Overbeck's writings will be cited as: *OWN 1, 2, 3*, etc.

Andreas Urs Sommer. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997. Pp. xii+183. Price €1.50.  
ISBN 3-05-003112-3.<sup>2</sup>

**Franz Overbeck/Heinrich Köselitz [Peter Gast] Briefwechsel (Supplementa Nietzscheana).** Edited with commentary by David Marc Hoffmann, Niklaus Peter and Theo Salfinger. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998. Pp. XLVIII+837. Price €25.00. ISBN 3-11-013023-8.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the first part of this review article, in the previous number of the *Irish Theological Quarterly*, the question of the tenability of Overbeck's critique of the Christian tradition (especially of its theology) was raised and can now be pursued somewhat further. The issues to be dealt with in this thorny area would, in principle, cover all aspects of Overbeck's understanding of Christian history. But clearly, it would be impossible in a review article to discuss in any great detail even all aspects of Overbeck's thought on the Christian tradition that surface in the new *OWN* edition of his writings (the *Nachlaß* itself is a vast labyrinth). Perhaps one way of attempting to chart a path through the profusion of Overbeck's writings on Christianity and to assess their strengths and weaknesses, might be to take *Christentum und Kultur* – Carl Albrecht Bernoulli's 1919 problematic compilation from the *Nachlaß*, now critically re-edited in *OWN 6/1*, that is to say, in the second section (volumes 4-6) of the new Metzler edition – as a starting-point for further investigation. All the more so should attention be given to this text as it has hitherto been of such undeniable significance for the reception of Overbeck's thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth this volume will be cited as: *Der Geist der Historie und das Ende des Christentums*.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth this volume will be cited as: *Briefwechsel*.

## Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlaß*: Section 2 (*Christentum und Kultur*)

*Christentum und Kultur* was the book that brought Overbeck to the attention of a wider readership and established his reputation as a radical critic of liberal Protestant theology and an unwitting (it must be said) forerunner of neo-orthodoxy. Karl Barth reviewed *Christentum und Kultur* in 1920,<sup>4</sup> and a year later referred to Overbeck as one of the four ‘factors’ that moved him to rewrite his Commentary on Romans.<sup>5</sup> Yet the book *Christentum und Kultur* was not one Overbeck had himself ever planned, let alone written. It certainly does not correspond to the project of a ‘secular (or, to use a Humean term,<sup>6</sup> “natural”) history of the church,’ which he had hoped to write. Hints of the latter, Walter Nigg had argued in his brilliant, early

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Unerledigte Anfragen an die heutige Theologie,’ in Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Zur inneren Lage des Christentums*, 1920, reprinted in Karl Barth, *Die Theologie und die Kirche* (Munich, 1928); English translation in Karl Barth, *Theology and Church*, tr. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM, 1962), 55-73.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (Zurich: TVZ, 1940), vii.

<sup>6</sup> David Hume had ‘sought to show that, like other human institutions, [religion] not only had, but was entirely explicable within terms of, a “natural” history’ (Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors. Wales, R. S. Thomas and God* [London: Flamingo, 1997], 411).

monograph on Overbeck,<sup>7</sup> are, as Ekkehard Stegemann points out,<sup>8</sup> to be found in his *Studien zur Geschichte der alten Kirche* (1875) rather than in *Christentum und Kultur*.

Moreover, Bernoulli's somewhat slapdash editorial method is all too evident in the case of *Christentum und Kultur*. There is no indication of where the material he drew on is located in Overbeck's papers nor of when it was written; sub-headings, like the main title, are Bernoulli's, not Overbeck's, and there are many straightforward errors of transcriptions, making Overbeck's meaning in some cases impossible to unravel. It is one of the many merits of the new critical edition that a modern reader can now read *Christentum und Kultur* with an awareness of the exact provenance and context of practically all its different sections,<sup>9</sup> and thus be able to compare what Overbeck actually wrote with the way Bernoulli transformed it.

In *OWN 6/1*, the editor, Barbara von Reibnitz, has reproduced Bernoulli's text of *Christentum und Kultur*, indicating where the various passages have been edited, often questionably. By including on the inner margins of her own edition the pagination of Bernoulli's, she has further facilitated a comparison between the latter and the new critical edition. She has also identified, where possible, the location in the *Kirchenlexicon* (chiefly) of the multitudinous excerpts that constituted Bernoulli's 1919 text, and then reproduced those excerpts in *OWN 4* and *5* in their original context in Overbeck's papers. Cross-references to the new critical edition of

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Nigg, *Franz Overbeck. Versuch einer Würdigung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1931).

<sup>8</sup> Ekkehard W. Stegemann, 'Einleitung,' *Schriften bis 1880, OWN 2*, 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> See Barbara von Reibnitz, 'Einleitung,' *Kirchenlexicon, OWN 4*, XVIII-XIX.

*Christentum und Kultur* are also contained in *OWN 4* and *5* (which include more ‘articles’ from Overbeck’s papers than those used to compile *Christentum und Kultur* originally), thus alerting readers of the selections from Overbeck’s *Kirchenlexicon* reproduced in *OWN 4* and *5* to those elements Bernoulli drew on in preparing his 1919 publication. Both *OWN 4* and *5* have a table of contents of the various articles included in each volume and a concluding general index. *OWN 6/2* provides – heroically, one must say, given the truly vast extent and complexity of the material involved – a general index to the entire *Kirchenlexicon* (of which, as already mentioned in the first part of this article, only a relatively small selection could be published in *OWN 4* and *5*). This tome, compiled and edited by Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub, will greatly facilitate further orientation in Overbeck’s *Kirchenlexicon*.

Since *Christentum und Kultur* was the lens through which hitherto Overbeck’s views have tended to be interpreted, especially by Karl Barth, it is hard to overestimate the importance of this new edition. The question could no doubt be raised of whether it might not have been sufficient to give a list (at the start of *OWN 4*, for example) of the passages Bernoulli used in *Christentum und Kultur*, since most of them are reproduced in *OWN 4* and *5*. This would have made it possible, for example, to publish more of the *Kirchenlexicon* in what is now *OWN 6/1*. Yet a solution of this kind would, it seems to me, have produced such an impossibly complicated cross-referencing system that it would have been unusable for ordinary mortals, and would not have given a reader the chance to see as clearly as one now can just how far, and in what precise ways, the original publication of *Christentum und Kultur* strays from the texts that Overbeck actually composed.

An inevitable, and somewhat ironic, consequence, however, of the line taken by the editor with regard to the *Kirchenlexicon* is that the choice of material published is still to a large extent governed by what Bernoulli chose to include in his *Christentum und Kultur*. Had the latter never appeared, would a modern, critical and selective edition of Overbeck's *Kirchenlexicon* have been very different from the one here presented? If the answer to this question were to be yes, one might wonder about the wisdom of paying so much attention to correcting the misrepresentation of Overbeck's thought constituted by Bernoulli's edition. Why not just ignore it, and move on? Yet that misrepresentation was, in the editor's view, serious enough, and above all, influential enough in the reception of Overbeck's thought, to warrant publishing a critical edition of the earlier (1919) book, albeit in the context of offering a wider sampling of articles from the *Kirchenlexicon*, in this new project. Given the fateful significance of the 1919 publication, it is difficult to see how the editor could have acted otherwise. In providing a critical edition of Bernoulli's text in *OWN 6/1* and by extending the scope of the articles published in *OWN 4* and *5* beyond what is found in *Christentum und Kultur*, Barbara von Reibnitz has gone a long way to presenting a new Overbeck, freed from Bernoulli's distorting and obfuscating editorial methods.

The additional articles aim principally at conveying a sense of Overbeck's general intellectual temperament and concerns, as reflected in his own unending, untiring, indeed unrelenting efforts to comprehend the great imponderables of his own 'theological' and human existence: Christianity, religion, theology, culture, modernity

and self-identity.<sup>10</sup> The vigorous and engaging combination of passionate subjectivity (even reflected in his frequent references, in later years, to the *Kirchenlexicon* as his *Privatencyclopädie*<sup>11</sup>) and uncompromising respect for critical objectivity that marks his writings shows that, in Overbeck's case too, the style is the man. Overbeck is, and understood himself as being, in the tradition of Lessing and Lichtenberg, with their commitment to the ideals of the *Aufklärung*, their stinging irony, and their unyielding honesty.

Yet Overbeck's never-ending search in his writings for intellectual and human truth is perhaps also an unwitting revelation of the quasi-impossibility of achieving a happy coincidence of subjectivity and objectivity in the realm of the mind, or, in other words, of achieving a complete identity of the subjective desire for objective truth with a felt sense of having attained it. At the same time, as Henry Chadwick has wisely observed, there does appear to be an undeniable need in human beings to find such a connection between subjective experience, however profound and however intensely felt, and what is other than the self, that is to say, a connection between the self and some objective order.<sup>12</sup> Romanticism's Achilles' heel is its failure to make this connection convincingly—but then, who can?

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<sup>10</sup> See von Reibnitz, 'Einleitung,' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 4*, XX-XXIII for the editor's explanation of her selection criteria for the additional articles.

<sup>11</sup> See von Reibnitz, 'Einleitung,' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 4*, XIII.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Chadwick, 'Romanticism and Religion,' in J. C. Laidlaw (ed.), *The Future of the Modern Humanities* (Leeds: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1969), 30: 'we cannot bear to live in a world of projections and desires that bear no relation to what is not ourselves.'

Unlike Lessing and Lichtenberg, Overbeck was not only an heir of the Enlightenment, but also a child of the romantic movement. This may go some way to explaining why he was not merely a critical questioner, but also an eternally unsatisfied one, as his probing, restless, sinewy style testifies. In a characteristically self-deprecating, but still defiant, observation on his own style, often criticized then and since for being awkward and excessively circumspect, he once wrote: ‘I suppose the best that can actually be said for “my style” is that it is “not unworthy of being corrected.” There’s nothing much else to recommend it. But this style has “lived and suffered.”’<sup>13</sup>

While the editor was correct, in my view, in following the course she did in regard to *Christentum und Kultur* and the other extracts she chose to publish from the *Kirchenlexicon* in *OWN 4* and *5*, it is maybe arguable that she could have made her edition (and this applies to Overbeck’s autobiographical writings in *OWN 7/1* and *7/2* as well) more accessible to the reader, had she adopted a less purist attitude to the problem of presenting Overbeck’s writings as he left them, and, for instance, not retained Overbeck’s abbreviations, or had she perhaps modernized the spelling. These

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Das Beste was sich für »meinen Stil« sagen lässt wird wohl in der That sein, dass er »nicht unwerth ist corrigiert zu werden« im Uebrigen aber davon geschwiegen werden mag. Dieser Stil hat »gelebt und gelitten« (Franz Overbeck, ‘Stil [mein],’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 5*, 459). The latter expression (‘gelebt und gelitten’) may perhaps be an echo of a similar expression in Goethe’s poem, ‘An die Günstigen’ (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Ernst Merian-Genast [Basel: Birkhäuser, 1944], 7).

are, however, minor quibbles, and in no way seriously detract from the inestimable value of this first large-scale critical edition of Overbeck's writings. In any case, the editor wished to retain the provisional or preparatory nature of Overbeck's notes, as they were certainly not, in their present state, intended for direct publication by their author.<sup>14</sup> In that sense, her editorial method seems apposite.

### ***Karl Barth and 'Christentum und Kultur'***

Barth's use of *Christentum und Kultur* can be seen, beyond Bernoulli's initial dubious editing of the material he published, as a further distorting interpretation of Overbeck's intellectual enterprise. The term 'fromm' ('pious or religious'), which he applied to Overbeck,<sup>15</sup> is surely not appropriate in any normally accepted sense of the term (unless one agrees with Heidegger that 'questioning is the piety of thinking'), given that Overbeck had thought of his work as showing how traditional Christianity, indeed traditional Western religion or religiosity generally, was no longer genuinely relevant to modern experience. On the other hand, Barth was, it is only right to add, undoubtedly sensitive to the depth and sharpness of Overbeck's mind and responded enthusiastically to his remorseless critique of liberal theology. But Barth was clearly less interested in dealing with the quandaries Overbeck's historical questioning of the Christian tradition had thrown up than he was in enlisting Overbeck in his own work of demolishing theological liberalism, as a first step towards restoring what he saw as authentic Christianity. As if anticipating his destiny at Barth's hands, Overbeck wrote

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<sup>14</sup> See von Reibnitz, 'Editorische Notiz,' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 4*, XXVI.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, vii.

in May 1904, as a general comment on the Swiss theological scene of the day:  
'Switzerland could become the soil for the *enfants terribles* of modern theology.'<sup>16</sup>

While it is now fairly widely recognized that Barth's use of Overbeck was tendentious, the question still remains: 'What, in fact, is the message or import of Overbeck's work?' In trying to answer this question, it will be useful to recall his own intellectual development, which this new edition of his writings makes more accessible than ever before. ighly illuminating for Overbeck's own self-understanding, is, in particular, the third section of *OWN*, devoted to his more personal writings, namely, his autobiographical reflections – written mainly in his period of retirement after 1897, when he sought clarity about, and perhaps a justification of, the course his life had taken<sup>17</sup> – and his thoughts on his closest friends, to which some attention will now be given. In such an intensely subjective

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<sup>16</sup> 'Die Schweiz könnte der Boden für die *enfants terribles* der modernen Theologie werden . . . ' (quoted in Martin Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian? Religion and History in the Thought of Franz Overbeck* [Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995], 227, n. 103). – This section of the *Kirchenlexicon* (catalogued under the rubric, 'A 239 Theologie (moderne) Schweiz') is not included in Overbeck, *Kirchenlexicon. Texte: Ausgewählte Artikel J-Z, OWN 5*.

<sup>17</sup> In a letter to the Principal of St Andrews (16 February 1899), explaining why he felt unable to accept the offer of an Honorary Doctorate, he refers to his concern to come to terms with his 'relationship to theology, which has always been a distorted one' ('mein stets schiefes Verhältniss zur Theologie' [Franz Overbeck, 'Anhang III: Briefwechsel mit James Donaldson 1899 und 1903-1905,' *Autobiographisches, OWN 7/1*, 287]).

thinker, this is obviously not a negligible aspect of his writings but one that must be taken into account in any attempt at evaluating his significance.

### **Franz Overbeck, Werke und Nachlaß: Section 3**

As Overbeck grew older, the boundaries between his intellectual, academic interests and his important, personal friendships, especially with Nietzsche and Rohde, became more and more porous (his papers on his friends, Nietzsche, Rohde and Treitschke, for instance, were originally incorporated into the *Kirchenlexicon*<sup>18</sup>). This was perhaps an inevitable outcome of the way his academic existence and his own existential concerns were always interlinked.

Looking back over his life in old age, as he prepared the second edition of *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie* (henceforth cited as *Christlichkeit*), Overbeck saw himself as being in the tradition of the Tübingen School of historical theology, a tradition that, in principle, had given him the basic tools for achieving his intellectual goal, the writing of a ‘secular history of the church.’ Overbeck never made any secret of his admiration for the founder of the Tübingen School, Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), both as a scholar and as a man. Above all, Baur’s aim of trying to understand the New Testament purely historically – that is to say, to understand its emergence and meaning within the widest possible historical and cultural context<sup>19</sup> – was one Overbeck wholly endorsed. But the Hegelian

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<sup>18</sup> See von Reibnitz, ‘Einleitung,’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 4*, XII.

<sup>19</sup> See Overbeck, ‘Tübinger Schule und Moderne Theologie,’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 5*, 608. While Overbeck conceded that, in fact, Baur’s basic focus (or sense of

philosophy of history that was embraced by Baur and his followers was a philosophy Overbeck could not share, as he mentions explicitly in the second edition of the *Christlichkeit*.<sup>20</sup>

This is an important distinction between Baur and Overbeck. The drama of historical consciousness that was played out in nineteenth-century German theology (and still?), was not fundamentally concerned with the results as such of historical research into, in particular, the books of the New Testament. What was at stake was not primarily how accurate a picture of historical events the New Testament could be seen to offer. It was, it seems to me, rather the status of history as such that was at stake in theology's historical investigation of Scripture in the nineteenth century, the heyday of the Tübingen School tradition. Scholars like Baur, who were convinced that a divine spirit moved through all history, had the confidence to investigate ancient texts in the sure knowledge that whatever they discovered would speak to them in some sense about God. Whether one took a conservative line (pinning the deity down to specific events) or a more relaxed, liberal approach (seeing the divine Spirit moving, if not effortlessly, at least purposefully through history), was at bottom a secondary matter. Hence, perhaps, Overbeck's dismissal of both conservative and liberal exegesis in the *Christlichkeit* as fundamentally missing the main point. For Overbeck, the point was that, unlike his fellow-theologians, he could no longer

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how the historical study of the New Testament should proceed) was too narrowly conceived by Baur himself, the focus as such was nevertheless indispensable for any serious historical study of the New Testament.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Overbeck, *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie, Schriften bis 1873, OVN 1*, 170.

assume or believe that any divine Spirit was moving through history. Like his friends, Nietzsche and Rohde, there was only history, unsponsored by any transcendent force. For Overbeck, to borrow Wallace Stevens's haunting and memorable line, 'We live in an old chaos of the sun' (from 'Sunday Morning').

Yet Overbeck's own rejection of Hegelianism (and, indeed, Christianity) deserves to be scrutinized in its turn. For while he had no belief in any divine spirit moving through the historical process, he did have certain convictions that are very close to a Hegelian interpretation of life. This is especially true of his belief that cultural forces or epochs come eventually to an end, and have to be discarded or transcended (*aufgehoben*, in the jargon of Hegelianism) in order to prepare the way for some new cultural formation in the future. Moreover, perhaps even more significantly, Hegel, as heir both to the rationalism of the *Aufklärung* and to Herder's developmental view of existence, saw history as the story of the gradual, necessary, and inevitable emergence of human freedom – or emancipation from irrationality – over the course of time. And freedom, too, is of inestimable importance for Overbeck. It is arguably the highest value he remained attached to throughout his whole career,<sup>21</sup> and indeed its passion for freedom was the aspect of nineteenth-century culture that, on his own admission, he most cherished.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, he paid Nietzsche the

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Overbeck, *Autobiographisches*, *OWN 7/1*, 245.

<sup>22</sup> See Overbeck, *Autobiographisches*, *OWN 7/1*, 235.

enviable compliment of being ‘the person in whose presence I breathed most freely.’<sup>23</sup>

Since freedom is also a key value for Christianity (‘the truth shall make you free’), and since Christianity sees no final cultural resting place for humanity in this world, it seems legitimate to ask whether Overbeck’s relationship to both Hegelianism and Christianity might perhaps be more complex than even he appears to have been willing to concede. Could the modern emphasis on, and high regard for, freedom, for example, be a secularized form of the religious (in this case, Christian) notion of redemption? Could the Hegelian sense of almost in-built cultural obsolescence be a secularized form of the Christian notion that ‘here we have no abiding city’? So, does Overbeck’s thought, then, still move within the parameters or framework of a recognizably Christian and religious world view, as does Hegel’s? Different answers will no doubt be forthcoming to such questions, and no one will approach them from a position of complete hermeneutical innocence, but they do seem to be valid questions.

It might be interesting to pursue this issue a little further, and to do so through a comparison between Overbeck and his friends Nietzsche and Rohde on the question of how they stood *vis-à-vis* the past. The drawing of such a comparison is now greatly assisted through the publication of Overbeck’s reminiscences of his friends in *OWN*

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<sup>23</sup> See Franz Overbeck, ‘Nietzsche und Ich,’ *Autobiographisches*, *OWN* 7/2, 94 (this quotation is from the second series of reflections in Overbeck’s *Nachlaß* with the title ‘Nietzsche und Ich’).

7/2, and his own autobiographical writings in *OWN 7/1*.<sup>24</sup> This comparison will show that, almost despite himself, Overbeck's rejection of Christianity is perhaps itself an unexpected expression of Christianity's eschatology, its orientation towards the future.

The passage I have chosen to highlight involves a discussion of Rohde and another distinguished nineteenth-century German classical philologist, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (who had famously attacked Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872] as unscholarly). In this passage, Overbeck evokes the, for him, purely historical (that is, non-transcendent) nature of reality. He observes that real masters of classical philology never forget that they are dealing with dead texts, and hence always try to go beyond pure philology or even reconstruction of the past through a study of its texts. In this sense, Rohde is, in Overbeck's eyes, a greater scholar than Wilamowitz, being more acutely aware of the problematic character of his profession.<sup>25</sup> Overbeck's own situation is, of course, doubly problematic or precarious. Unlike Rohde, he has no commitment as such to the ancient texts or the ancient culture (primitive Christianity) he studies, whereas Rohde, for his part, does. Yet Rohde also realizes that the world of classical antiquity, to which he is existentially attached, is drifting further and further away from him, even as he tries to uphold its values in a way that Nietzsche could not, or at least could no longer,

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<sup>24</sup> Both volumes have also helpful chronological tables at the end, enabling the reader to get a quick overview of the biographies of those involved.

<sup>25</sup> See Overbeck, 'Philologie (Allgemeines),' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 5*, 242-44.

endorse.<sup>26</sup> In this context, Overbeck situates his own relationship to Nietzsche *vis-à-vis* Rohde's: 'In Rohde's case, his profession as a philologist really could become the cause for his break with Nietzsche. My profession as a *theologian* could never have had such an effect. For, Rohde's relationship to Greek culture was in fact completely different from my relationship to Christianity. The friendship that existed among the three of us, Nietzsche, Rohde, and myself, is very instructive in helping me to understand my relationship to Christianity, my estrangement from it.'<sup>27</sup>

Overbeck had a view of cultural history that perceived it as a grandiose process of birth, growth, and decay, but, as the preceding passage indicates, there is no evidence that he lamented the Christian past or wished to revive it, in the way that Rohde seems to have regretted the fact that attachment to Greek antiquity was slipping away from modern consciousness. Overbeck saw Christianity as a religion with deep roots in the culture of antiquity (sharing, for instance, and continuing antiquity's disparagement of women<sup>28</sup>) and he was convinced that the modern world's break with Christianity was an aspect of its move away from antiquity itself: 'The present age is breaking with the world of antiquity just as it's breaking with

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<sup>26</sup> In this context, it is interesting to note George Santayana's comment that 'backward glances were not for the impetuous Nietzsche, who felt he was a prophet of the future, and really was one' (George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* [London: Dent, 1939; originally published 1916], 97).

<sup>27</sup> See Overbeck, 'Theologie (meine),' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 5, 498-99, and Overbeck, 'Rohde und Nietzsche,' *Autobiographisches*, *OWN* 7/2, 227-28.

<sup>28</sup> See Franz Overbeck, 'Christenthum und Alterthum. Allgemeines,' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 4, 160.

Christianity. On the way to what? – To barbarism or to a higher culture? – Only the future will tell.’<sup>29</sup>

But Overbeck’s work is, as already stressed, not an elegy for Christianity. In fact, one of the fascinating aspects of his thought is the way it mirrors the very tradition it allegedly repudiates. His writings contain many references to the need for a break with the past for the sake of the future. On one occasion, he even suggested that moderns found themselves in a similar situation to that of the early Christians, and had to make a similar effort as the latter did in striking out in a new direction,<sup>30</sup> without any guarantee of where the journey would take them.<sup>31</sup> This, in addition to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 422 (quoting in translation a short passage from *Selbstbekenntnisse* [ed. E. Vischer], 166): ‘Our defection from the old and our falling away from it are irreparable, as we learn from Hebrews 6, 4-8. . . . There is nothing for it: having come so far, we have no option but to press on further. . . . If our falling away has truly extinguished all light for us, we can least expect to receive new illumination by turning back, and we can be sure that it can only lie ahead of us. We find ourselves faced with the same *adinaton* [impossibility] as the early Christians.’

<sup>31</sup> See Franz Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, *OWN 6/1*, 110 and, for the original context in Overbeck’s papers, Overbeck, ‘Bibel (Allgemeines),’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 4*, 54 (where, in an article on the Bible, Overbeck speaks about the need to risk abandoning no longer tenable positions or beliefs in the attempt to find a new way forward [‘sich in die Luft stellen’]. He notes that the Bible itself, in its

references to being a citizen of the future rather than of the past,<sup>32</sup> seems to mark Overbeck out as a characteristically Western intellectual, still moving in the wake of the Christian view of reality, whereas Nietzsche's exaltation of concepts like the 'eternal return of the same' or '*amor fati*' ('love of fate') seems more like a deliberate (and desperate?) attempt to go back behind and beyond Christianity to a kind of ecstatic, exultant, and exuberant Stoicism. Characteristically, Overbeck remained

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movement from Old to New Testament, is in a sense a teacher in this regard, though it is odd that he does not appear to stress the continuity of Judaism after the emergence of Christianity: the birth of Christianity in no sense signalled the end of Judaism. In the same context, Overbeck notes how major cultural shifts do not happen overnight, but only become established over a lengthy period of time and with great difficulty. A related idea, from the opposite pole of the historical perspective, can be found in a letter he wrote to James Donaldson (16 January 1904), in which he spoke of the, in his view, undeniable, gradual disappearance of Christianity in the modern world as a process taking place in 'the majestic fashion' ('im majestätischen Schritt') in which all great cultural movements tend to fade away when their time comes (Overbeck, 'Briefwechsel mit James Donaldson 1899 und 1903-1905,' *Autobiographisches*, *OWN 7/1*, 297).

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, remarks like: 'My day will certainly come, even if I don't live to see it' ['Meine Zeit wird schon kommen, erlebe ich sie auch nicht mehr'] (Overbeck, 'Christenthum [Welteroberung] Gegenwart,' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN 4*, 269); or Overbeck, *Autobiographisches*, *OWN 7/1*, 237, where he speaks about 'the feeling of having his home in the future,' while being 'unable to be its prophet.'

sceptical about Nietzsche's optimistic affirmation of existence, describing it, ominously, as the 'optimism . . . of a desperado.'<sup>33</sup>

In some degree of tension, however, with Overbeck's view of history as a process moving forward, was his view of history as an almost, as we have seen, biological process of development and decline. Cultures he saw as living organisms that were born, grew to maturity, then faded and disappeared. One of his aphorisms on Christianity illustrates this graphically: 'Christianity is the last phosphorescent glow of antiquity in its period of decay,'<sup>34</sup> while his notion of *Urgeschichte* (itself, incidentally, hardly a self-evident, 'scientific' concept) illustrates, as it were, the other end of the spectrum, the emergence of new cultural formations. History he viewed thus as the scene of 'coming to be' and 'passing away,' a mixture of the two, making both optimism and pessimism with regard to history and culture equally valid and equally arbitrary.

Coming early under the influence of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, as many of the more wary spirits of mid-nineteenth-century Germany did, Overbeck himself inclined more to a pessimistic view of human existence. It is even likely, though no doubt impossible to prove, that his fundamentally pessimistic view of life helped to

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<sup>33</sup> 'Der Nietzsche'sche Optimismus ist nun einmal der eines Desperado' (Overbeck, *Autobiographisches*, *OWN* 7/2, 214 [with an abbreviation removed]). Less sympathetically, Santayana referred to it as 'a rakish optimism' (Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy*, 97).

<sup>34</sup> Overbeck, 'Christenthum und Alterthum. Allgemeines,' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 4, 157.

confirm him in his vision of the world-denying, ascetical dimension of Christianity. Towards the end of the second chapter of the *Christlichkeit*, for instance, he asserts apodictically: ‘The only serious grounds human beings have ever had for accepting Christianity has been their awareness of the misery of existence.’<sup>35</sup> And in the last year of his life, Overbeck contemplated death ‘as even now merely the gentle liberator from the fatality of existence.’<sup>36</sup> On a more specifically theological note, he wrote in his private papers that it was Christianity’s, in his view, ultimately futile attempt to present God as a God of love, in a world clearly for Overbeck too saturated with suffering to permit such a hypothesis, that helped to undermine Christianity as a religion.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the Old Testament, in his view, wisely avoided any attempt at a theodicy, thus showing, in Overbeck’s judgement, its superiority to the New Testament. Not surprisingly, he agrees with Marcion’s interpretation of the Old Testament, and sees Christianity as ‘overreaching’ itself in its attempt at a theodicy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Franz Overbeck, *How Christian is our Present-Day Theology?* Annotated translation with an introduction by Martin Henry, foreword by David Tracy (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2005), 72; for the German original, see Overbeck, *Christlichkeit, Schriften bis 1873, OWN 1*, 205.

<sup>36</sup> Overbeck, *Autobiographisches, OWN 7/1*, 249.

<sup>37</sup> Overbeck, ‘Altes Testament (Verhältniss zum Neuen) Allgemeines,’ *Kirchenlexicon, OWN 4*, 14-15, and Overbeck, ‘Christenthum (Pessimismus),’ *Kirchenlexicon, OWN 4*, 249.

<sup>38</sup> See Overbeck, ‘Altes Testament (Pessimismus),’ *Kirchenlexicon, OWN 4*, 14, and Overbeck, ‘Christenthum (Pessimismus),’ *Kirchenlexicon, OWN 4*, 249.

There is, however, at least one moving, and persuasively argued reference in his writings to the power of love as the only force capable of resisting the all-consuming, destructive power of critical reason, since its source is not the same as that of rational thought.<sup>39</sup> Curiously, the passage in question is also the only one this reviewer has ever come across in Overbeck's work that mentions the term 'God' in a positive sense. He uses the term in reference to the 'natural foundations' – which transcend the power of human beings themselves – of those things that can be cherished in human existence. Then, characteristically, he adds that only someone 'who knows how to talk about such matters,' should use the term, and, furthermore, that the reality of what he is referring to does not in any case depend on the term itself.<sup>40</sup>

The dominant note in Overbeck's experience of his own culture, however, and certainly of the role of traditional religion within it, was one of confusion and bewilderment. His writings are full of references to the 'crisis of the present time' ('Noth der Gegenwart'<sup>41</sup>) or to the 'religious confusion of the present time' ('den religiösen Wirren der Gegenwart'<sup>42</sup>). He feels Christianity as no longer a strong faith among modern, critically thinking people. The hopelessness of finding a substitute for

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<sup>39</sup> See Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, OWN 6/1, 288-89.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>41</sup> See Overbeck, A 239 Theologie (Zweck), 3 (quoted in Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian?*, 11) and Overbeck, *Christlichkeit, Schriften bis 1873*, OWN 1, 237.

<sup>42</sup> Franz Overbeck, 'Vorwort,' *Studien zur Geschichte der alten Kirche* (originally published 1875), *Schriften bis 1880*, OWN 2, 20.

Christianity he evokes in words that have a particularly modern ring, as when he talks about moderns having, in the wake of the religion they have lost, only an attitude of ‘stupid, empty waiting’ (‘ein blödes, leeres Warten’<sup>43</sup>) for some kind of substitute.

It is a permanent leitmotiv of Overbeck’s thought that in the post-Enlightenment world, any existential connection with primitive Christianity has been irrevocably lost (‘The falcon cannot hear the falconer,’ as Yeats has it in ‘The Second Coming’). This theme is common to his published and unpublished works. It is unmistakably present as early as the Basel Inaugural Lecture of 1870. And the theme of modernity’s unbridgeable distance from Christianity also colours Overbeck’s assessment of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity. Thus, he judged that it was Nietzsche’s profound sense of the psychological impossibility of accepting Christian faith in the modern world that constituted the most acceptable and the soundest aspect of that critique (as when, in response to the Christian ideal of ‘becoming like children’ [Mt 18: 3], Nietzsche writes: ‘Oh how far we are from this psychological naïveté!’<sup>44</sup>). This was a theme Overbeck himself was acutely sensitive to: ‘Christians *have* to be children, but they *can’t* be. And how could it be otherwise, considering that the demand was made in relation to a different world from the one in which the church and Christians now exist?’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Overbeck, ‘Religion (Ueberflüssigkeit), *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 5, 327. This practically anticipates the mood of Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*.

<sup>44</sup> See Overbeck, ‘Nietzsche (Christenthum) Eigenes Verhältniss dazu,’ *Autobiographisches*, *OWN* 7/2, 51.

<sup>45</sup> Overbeck, ‘Christenthum und Kindersinn,’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 4, 217. See also Overbeck, *Selbstbekenntnisse* (ed. E. Vischer), 169-70.

## Overbeck's 'Secular History of the Church'

The task of cultural criticism Overbeck set himself as his primary intellectual project was, as has already been mentioned, to be carried out by his planned but never executed *profane Kirchengeschichte* ('secular history of the church').<sup>46</sup> In a letter written to Overbeck, on receipt of his *Über die Anfänge der patristischen Literatur* ('On the Beginnings of Patristic Literature' [1882]), by his and Nietzsche's friend Heinrich Köselitz [Peter Gast]<sup>47</sup> on 25 September 1883,<sup>48</sup> and reprinted in the painstakingly edited<sup>49</sup> correspondence between Overbeck and Köselitz,<sup>50</sup> the latter

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Overbeck, 'Einleitung,' *Christlichkeit, Schriften bis 1873*, *OWN 1*, 263.

<sup>47</sup> It appears that the pseudonym, Peter Gast, was given to Köselitz by Nietzsche, with humorous intent. It was allegedly intended to recall, on the one hand, the 'Stone Guest' ('der steinerne Gast') of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (with Nietzsche the 'Don Giovanni' of the mind?), and, on the other, St Peter (as if Köselitz were regarded by Nietzsche as his chief 'apostle': see Franz Overbeck/Heinrich Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, XXXI). On Nietzsche and Köselitz, see Frederick R. Love, *Nietzsche's Saint Peter: Genesis and Cultivation of an Illusion* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981; I am grateful to James Overbeck for drawing my attention to this work and pointing out the different levels of possible meaning behind Köselitz's pseudonym).

<sup>48</sup> Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, 146-48.

<sup>49</sup> By David Marc Hoffmann (whose *Zur Geschichte des Nietzsche-Archivs* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991] is the standard work for the history of the *Nietzsche-Archiv*), Niklaus Peter (one of the foremost Overbeck scholars and a member of the

wrote: ‘Nietzsche struggles directly against Christianity; in this way he is unintentionally helping to preserve it. What you are able to do is – without harming Christianity in any way or provoking it into any reactions – in due course to make it impossible, by recording the details of its past.’

Commenting on these observations in 1901, Overbeck acknowledged that Köselitz had accurately pinpointed the basic concern of his historical research, adding that it was precisely what he had had in mind when he spoke of a ‘secular history of the church.’ But he noted that he no longer felt able to create, from the masses of

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editorial commission of *OWN*), and Theo Salfinger (who established the text of the letters here printed). 24 of the letters had to be reconstructed, as the original letters were lost; the originals of most of the letters in the correspondence are in Weimar (where Köselitz’s *Nachlaß* is located) and Basel (see Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, XXII, XLIV). The lengthy and insightful editorial commentary for the correspondence is provided by N. Peter (for the period 1877-88) and D. M. Hoffmann (for the period 1889-1905): see Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, XLV. The volume also has a concise and informative introduction, and a helpful chronological table (from 1837-1919) covering the main events in the lives of the two correspondents, with emphasis on their relationship to Nietzsche. It is somewhat disappointing, however, to discover that the final index only refers to the letters themselves and does not take account of the material included in the splendid commentary to the letters mentioned above, which forms a large part of the volume.

<sup>50</sup> See the bibliographical details at the beginning of this article.

material he had assembled, the history he had hoped to compose.<sup>51</sup> His academic life had in fact been devoted to the long, never completed task of writing a ‘secular history of the church,’ in order to demonstrate that Christianity could and should be understood as a phase of human history that had come to an end in the modern world, and hence could be left behind with a clear intellectual conscience, rather than simply discarded in an arbitrary, irresponsible fashion. In that sense, Overbeck could perhaps be seen as Christianity’s would-be ‘Owl of Minerva’ – to invoke Hegel’s poetic description of the historian-philosopher – the thinker whose historical summary of the Christian tradition would show it to be now obsolete. And this is surely as significant an aspect of the ‘genealogy’ of Overbeck’s enterprise as the general tendency of many post-Enlightenment thinkers, like Overbeck, to seek almost instinctively, in the wake of David Hume, to construct a ‘natural’ history of the phenomenon of religion.

Yet whether one can wholly endorse Overbeck’s own self-understanding, is surely open to debate. For despite his quasi-Hegelian understanding of the role of historical science, which enabled him to interpret ‘a secular history of the church’ as potentially delivering Christianity’s death certificate, there is so much else, as we have seen, to be taken into account when considering Overbeck’s writings, that it is no doubt unwise to evaluate him entirely according to his own intentions. What might even be called his *odium theologicum*, directed especially at Harnack (to which attention was drawn in the first part of this article), should alert readers to significant dimensions of his intellectual personality that ought not to be omitted from any overall assessment of his *œuvre*. Above all, his sensitivity to Christianity’s aboriginal,

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<sup>51</sup> See Overbeck, ‘Zu meinen Aufzeichnungen über meine Basler Professur,’ *Autobiographisches*, *OWN 7/1*, 244.

instinctive claim to be ‘not of this world,’ and hence to be beyond measurement by the criteria of ‘worldly’ greatness or success or even understanding, arguably makes Overbeck an eloquent, if reluctant and rather unexpected, representative of the theological tradition he considered he had repudiated, and to which he had, admittedly, as he himself wrote, such a ‘distorted relationship.’<sup>52</sup>

In the final section of this article, we can look briefly at the picture of Overbeck that emerges through the double lens of his early friendship with Nietzsche and his correspondence with Heinrich Köselitz, beginning with the latter. Both perspectives underscore yet again Overbeck’s independence of mind, while his early exchanges with Nietzsche – in the period that saw the publication of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), and his first two *Untimely Meditations* (*David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer* [1873, published together with Overbeck’s *Christlichkeit*] and *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* [1874]) – cast light on his struggle with the central and still unresolved question of the meaning of history.

### **Overbeck, Köselitz, and Nietzsche**

The published correspondence (*Briefwechsel*) between Overbeck and Köselitz is not only illuminating for their own relationship, but also for the light it can shed on their common friend, Nietzsche. And, of course, it is obviously of interest too for the early history of the *Nietzsche-Archiv*.<sup>53</sup> Overbeck had for a time thought of leaving

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<sup>52</sup> See above, n. 17.

<sup>53</sup> The *Nietzsche-Archiv*, originally set up Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, in Naumburg in 1894, before being moved to Weimar in 1896, had been

the letters he had received from Nietzsche as well as his own reflections on Nietzsche to Köselitz, who had got to know Overbeck through Nietzsche,<sup>54</sup> for possible posthumous publication.<sup>55</sup> But the break between the two men over their different attitudes to the *Nietzsche-Archiv* in Weimar (Köselitz collaborated<sup>56</sup> with it in a way

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established for the purpose of fostering Nietzsche's growing fame and virtually sponsoring a Nietzsche-cult. Köselitz, uniquely experienced in deciphering Nietzsche's handwriting, was, after initial difficulties with Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, an indispensable collaborator in the early years of the *Archiv's* activities. He and Overbeck had been the first to be involved with Nietzsche's *Nachlaß* in the immediate aftermath of the latter's breakdown (we recall it was Overbeck who went to Nietzsche's assistance in Turin in early January 1889), but when Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche returned to Germany from Paraguay in 1893, she asserted forthrightly her claim to be the principal guardian and promoter of Nietzsche's writings, in particular through the founding of the *Nietzsche-Archiv*.

<sup>54</sup> See Overbeck, *Autobiographisches*, OWN 7/1, 247. Köselitz came to Basel in 1875 (see Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, XXXIII) to sit at the feet of Nietzsche, but he also attended Overbeck's lectures.

<sup>55</sup> See Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, 472, 490.

<sup>56</sup> Overbeck deeply disapproved of Köselitz's collaboration with Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, in the publication of the first volume of Nietzsche's letters (*Briefe* [1901]). Köselitz was also heavily involved with the tendentious publication, *Der Wille zur Macht*, from Nietzsche's *Nachlaß* in 1901. After Overbeck's death, he took legal steps, along with Nietzsche's sister, to have certain pages (containing excerpts from his letters to Overbeck from an earlier period that had withering comments to make on Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche: see

Overbeck could not countenance) put an end to that plan.<sup>57</sup> This break is evident in the lack of any correspondence between the two men after late 1901, although communication between them was re-established in late 1904, and continued up to Overbeck's death in June 1905.

Nietzsche scholars will undoubtedly find this finely produced volume of enormous interest for the sidelights it casts on Nietzsche himself from two people who knew him closely, but did not come from the same academic background (in classical philology) as Nietzsche (Köselitz was a musician), nor, perhaps more significantly, did they have the same relationship to Nietzsche, Köselitz being a disciple, Overbeck the independent-minded friend. Overbeck himself considered his

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Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, 809) in Carl Albrecht Bernoulli's *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine Freundschaft*, 2 vols. (Jena: Diederichs, 1908)

blackened out. Overbeck's refusal to co-operate with the *Nietzsche-Archiv* in Weimar helped in the long run, as is now clear, to promote a more critical evaluation of Nietzsche's writings. It should be added that in 1909, one year after the publication of Bernoulli's monograph on Overbeck and Nietzsche, Köselitz did in fact terminate his relationship definitively with Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and the *Nietzsche-Archiv* in Weimar (see Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, 813), thus bringing a rather fraught relationship to a final conclusion (he had broken off collaboration with Nietzsche's sister in 1894 once already: see Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, 805).

<sup>57</sup> See Overbeck, 'Tagebuchartiges,' *Autobiographisches*, OWN 7/1, 89-90, and Overbeck, 'Nietzsche und Ich,' *Autobiographisches*, OWN 7/2, 85-87 (these remarks are from the first series of notes in Overbeck's *Nachlaß* with the title 'Nietzsche und Ich').

correspondence with Köselitz to be, along with his Nietzsche letters, ‘by far the most important document’ for his relationship with Nietzsche.<sup>58</sup> And, of course, as already mentioned, Overbeck found Köselitz one of the most insightful readers of his own writings. For all these reasons, this volume of correspondence between Overbeck and Köselitz is of great value for all those interested in Nietzsche as well as in Overbeck himself, and indeed in the personality and cultural significance of Heinrich Köselitz, alias Peter Gast.

Similarly, the exemplary, if challengingly formulated, monograph by Andreas Urs Sommer<sup>59</sup> (which usefully also contains in an appendix excerpts from Overbeck’s *Kirchenlexicon* not included in *OWN*), is of great interest. It concentrates on the early intellectual exchanges, especially on the question of history (both as a process and an academic discipline) between Nietzsche and Overbeck in the early 1870s in Basel (the period of their most sustained collaboration, when the two young professors had lodgings in the same house). This work will be helpful not only to Overbeck scholars – Overbeck’s independence of judgement with regard to Nietzsche, already recognized as precociously brilliant with his appointment to the chair of classical philology at Basel at the age of 24, and yet sympathy for Nietzsche’s intellectual adventures, can be clearly seen at this early stage in their relationship – but also to Nietzsche scholars, who can obtain a unique insight through this volume into the emergence and the problematic aspects of Nietzsche’s early works. Sommer’s intriguing conclusion that Overbeck was finally less an historian than a sage delivering Christianity’s immemorial *memento mori* in a secularized form, in ‘the

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<sup>58</sup> Overbeck/Köselitz, *Briefwechsel*, XIX.

<sup>59</sup> Andreas Urs Sommer, *Der Geist der Historie und das Ende des Christentums*.

garb of historical science,<sup>60</sup> is worth pondering. Yet it does seem to beg the question perhaps of how one can be aware of finitude in a vacuum, without assuming, dialectically as it were, that there is also infinitude. And hence, with an acceptance of the problematic status of history (as a process), the religious question returns, *nolens volens*.

Perhaps, in conclusion, one might recall the words of the late James Barr, who wrote insightfully on the whole question of history as both process and intellectual discipline. What he had to say on the problems raised for Christianity by the historical-critical method (a subject central to Overbeck's writings) is particularly interesting for students of Overbeck, in that Barr, too, puts his finger on the significance of the eschatological side of the Christian faith. He does so, however, in a way that is open-ended, and implicitly offers a different (and persuasive) approach to the problem of the role of history in religion that is at least worth comparing with Overbeck's:

A whole series of problems that arise for theology from its rootage in past history do not arise from its rootage in future history or eschatology: in particular of course the whole historical-critical question. If we think of Christianity as equally poised between past history and future history, and in that sense a historical religion, there is a strong disparity between the two, in that historical method, as a mode of investigation of sources, falls heavily upon the past component but scarcely at all upon the future component. It was the misfortune of the church that, at the same time as the past component came

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<sup>60</sup> Sommer, *Der Geist der Historie und das Ende des Christentums*, 120.

under difficulties from historical criticism, the church itself was more and more assuming and asserting that the past component was the essential one, and this has continued to be so until very recent times indeed.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> James Barr, 'Historical Reading and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,' in James Barr, *Explorations in Theology* 7 (London: SCM, 1980), 35.