

Franz Overbeck: An Introduction'

The viability of Christianity in the modern age was not only a theoretical but also an existential question that preoccupied Nietzsche's close friend, the Basel theologian, Franz Overbeck. Though Karl Barth acknowledged his debt to his troublesome predecessor, Overbeck has otherwise tended to be quietly ignored by mainstream modern theology. Given his scepticism about the value of theology, this neglect is perhaps understandable. Whether it is justified, is the question taken up in this article. [Editor]

Franz Overbeck (1837–1905)² is still a relatively muted presence in modern theology. His views, especially on 'modern theology' itself, might be regarded, he himself conceded, as simply the 'Confessions of a crank'.³ Little wonder, then, if his works are relatively unknown. One small indication of the comparative lack of interest in his writings in the English-speaking world, though not only there, lies in the frequency with which he can be confused with the nineteenth-century German painter Johann Friedrich Overbeck.⁴ If Overbeck continues to be, generally speaking, still an unknown quantity, his most significant completed work, *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie*,⁵ published twice in his own lifetime, has fared little better than its author. Overbeck's own reserve, the relative paucity of the works he himself published, the fact

1. This article was written as a brief introduction to Franz Overbeck's life and thought, to accompany a translation of the first chapter (preceded by the 'Foreword to the First Edition') of Overbeck's short book *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie* (1873, second ed. 1903). The translation is to appear in the next issue of the *ITQ*. In the body of the following article, the title of Overbeck's book — after its first mention — has been abbreviated to *Christlichkeit*, and in the footnotes it has been abbreviated to *Chr* ('Chr' or 'Chr', where the difference in edition is significant). Quotations from *Chr* are taken from the second edition of 1903 (reprinted in 1974 by the *Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft*, Darmstadt). A new critical edition of Overbeck's 'Works and Unpublished Writings', planned in nine volumes, started to appear in 1994 (Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlaß in neun Bänden*, ed. Ekkehard W. Stegemann et al., Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1994ff., hereafter abbreviated to *WN*). The first volume of this project contains a critical edition of *Chr*, based on the first edition of 1873 (*WN*, Vol. 1, *Schriften bis 1873*, ed. E.W. Stegemann and Niklaus Peter in collaboration with Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub, 1994, 135–318).

2. For a concise and insightful introduction to Overbeck in English, see J. C. O'Neill, *The Bible's Authority* (Edinburgh, 1991), 179–190. A recent interpretation of the influence of nineteenth-century Basel on Overbeck's thought can be found in Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A study in unseasonable ideas* (Chicago, 2000).

3. *Chr*², 212.

4. See, for instance, the English translation of André Malraux, *Autismemoirs*, tr. T. Kilmartin (London, 1968), 21f. (cf. 444); Hans Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1970), 181 (cf. 702); the English translation of Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, tr. D.E. Green (New York, 1991), 377ff. (cf. 460); and the new English translation of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, tr. E.T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco, 1992), 32, (cf. 425).

5. Literally: 'On the Christian Character of Our Present-day Theology'.

that he lived in the heyday of a triumphant liberal Protestantism with which he was not in sympathy, and the undeniably tortuous complexity, even awkwardness, of his own German style – all such considerations may go some way towards explaining his status as a theologian known chiefly for his friendship with Friedrich Nietzsche, rather than for the quality of his own thought.

In Overbeck can be found, increasingly as time went on, a perhaps not entirely unique combination of extreme reticence or modesty, on the one hand, and a relentlessly critical, even polemical temperament, on the other. The former characteristic is reflected in the second edition (1903) of *Christlichkeit*, with its frequent use of the diminutive form *Schrifften* [‘little tract’] to designate the text of 1873, a term not actually used in the original version;⁶ the latter trait is evident in Overbeck’s final onslaught on ‘modern theology’,⁷ where Harnack is satirised as its ‘High Priest’,⁸ and his popular book, ‘The Essence [Wesen] of Christianity’, dismissed scornfully as revealing only the ‘insignificance’ [‘Unwesentlichkeit’] of Christianity. In the retrospective description of his own work as a ‘little tract’, there is also, no doubt, an element of ironic, even sarcastic self-distancing on Overbeck’s part from ‘modern’ theologians, such as Ritschl or Harnack, whose vast output, even if it did confer prominence and prestige on its authors, only muddled the waters of Christianity, in his estimation, rather than clarifying them. In remarks published posthumously in *Christentum und Kultur*, Overbeck underlined the deadening effect of Ritschl’s theology by contrasting it with the thought of Pascal, a writer he (and Nietzsche) much admired. For Overbeck, Ritschl’s almost total lack of any *esprit de finesse* differentiates him fundamentally from Pascal. The unflattering comparison with Pascal, which admittedly few theologians could face with equanimity, might be judged in Ritschl’s case to be not quite unjustified, were one to agree with Overbeck’s verdict that the latter’s high theological reputation was ‘usurped’.¹⁰

It must be acknowledged, however, that the lack of any available English translations of Overbeck’s writings inevitably suggests that they may not be worth evaluating, if they have failed so far to attract much interest. The burden of proof lies, then, with those who would disagree with such a pessimistic assessment. Yet one can take encouragement from Nietzsche’s words in the foreword to *The Anti-Christ*: ‘Some are born posthumously.’ The nearly completed project of publishing Overbeck’s *Werke und Nachlaß* [‘Works and Unpublished Writings’] in nine volumes¹¹

6. See below, n. 29.

7. *Chr.*, 200ff.

8. *Ibid.*, 216.

9. *Ibid.*, 217. The pun might be caught perhaps in English by contrasting ‘The Substance

of Christianity’ with ‘The Insubstantiality of Christianity’.

10. See the relevant passage from *Christentum und Kultur* (ed. C.A. Bernoulli, 1919), 163ff., now critically re-edited by Barbara von Reibnitz in *WN*, Vol. 6/1, *Kirchenlexikon, Materialien: Christentum und Kultur* (1996), 198ff.

is a substantial sign that his thought is now perhaps beginning to be ‘born’.

The importance of Overbeck’s work lies primarily in the way it faces unflinchingly the questions associated in his own day as now with Christianity’s credibility in the modern age. His thought emerges from, indeed is an expression of, the conflict between Christianity and (modern) culture. Some might say there is nothing very new in that. And Overbeck would agree; indeed one of his deepest convictions is that Christianity and culture, to both of which, in his eyes, theology has a problematic relationship, have been permanently in conflict,¹² and for as long as Christianity survives, always will be. More, however, is involved here than simply a variation on the ancient tussle between the authority of tradition and the claims of independent thought or, in more familiar terms, between faith and reason. Overbeck’s thought, it can be argued, is not just another episode in the long-established, traditional clash between tradition and modernity in Western culture. For what gives his work its unusual flavour in the modern debate is his own interpretation of Christianity and of theology. Overbeck’s views on these matters were – as *Christlichkeit* shows – not only at variance with other interpretations of Christianity and of theology current in his own day, but they still remain a thorn in the flesh of any self-serving and ‘unearned’ account of the Christian faith. While the ‘our’ in the title of the short work, *Christlichkeit*, is not without a touch of irony,¹³ there is nothing playful or harmless about Overbeck’s critique of theology. Indeed his tormented quarrel with the discipline, of which he was a professor, is sustained by an animus that seems to transcend by far the cut and thrust of mere academic debate. The palpable sense of outrage and indignation with which, especially in his later writings, he excoriates the (in his eyes) obtuse self-assurance of modern theologians and their falsification and trivialisation of Christianity, is not so much a token of moral censure, as a sign of his exasperated contempt for theological philistinism – an expression which for Overbeck would be, alas, something of a tautology. However, it would probably be also true to say that, like many others who have thought deeply about Christianity, Overbeck was more vociferous about what he thought it was not, than about what he thought it was.

A further important dimension of Overbeck’s rigorous critique of Christian theology has its origin in the Romantic distinction between ‘life’ and ‘thought’. For Overbeck, as for many thinkers influenced by German Romanticism, life and thought, or in religious terms faith and reason (or knowledge), always diverge: knowledge is dead, faith alone is life-sustaining. As Hölderlin’s Hyperion puts it, ‘Man is a god when he

12. Or, as he puts it pointedly towards the end of the epilogue to *Chr.* (216f.): ‘[T]hat theology has always been modern, and for that very reason has also always been the natural betrayer of Christianity, is a basic thesis of my little tract ...’

13. Cf. Anders Urs Sommer, *Der Geist der Historie und das Ende des Christentums: Zur*

dreams, a beggar when he reflects.¹⁴ Nietzsche exploited a similar antithesis in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), between the 'Dionysian' and 'Apollinian' elements in ancient Greek culture. The idea that knowledge and death are connected is, of course, older than the age of Romanticism. It is at least as old as the myth recounting Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise, putting them on the road to death, for wanting to taste forbidden knowledge, while the more general theological idea of a dichotomy between the letter and the spirit,¹⁵ that resonates in Overbeck's assertion of a split between knowledge and faith, is also deeply ingrained in Western culture. As transformed (or secularised) by Romanticism, this age-old dichotomy becomes one between truth (represented by reason or knowledge) and illusion (represented by religious faith), where, paradoxically, truth spells death, and illusion, life.

On the fundamental Romantic distinction between 'life' and 'thought', one might say that, for the Romantics, thought or knowledge is always 'too late'. Or, as Hegel famously put it: 'When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy: the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.'¹⁶ Translated into the relationship between Christianity and theology, this would mean that Christianity can never, as a living faith, be captured by any theology. And when the meaning of Christianity is spelt out by any theology, it is in fact its death certificate. The Romantic distinction between 'life' and 'thought' is central also to Schleiermacher's view of religion. For Schleiermacher too understood the living reality of religion as being in its essence beyond the grasp of any conceptualisation. The difference between Schleiermacher and Overbeck is, however, that Schleiermacher, the 'theologian of Romanticism', claimed to have antennae for perceiving the non-conceptualisable truth of religion, while Overbeck was sceptical of such claims. And whereas Schleiermacher at the beginning of the nineteenth century was confident that the gulf between Christianity and modern culture could be bridged, Overbeck at the century's end had no such hopes.

For Overbeck, indeed, the battle between Christianity and culture had long since been decided in culture's favour, but public acknowledgement of Christianity's end was still being resisted. Not out of hypocrisy or 'bad faith', Overbeck appears to have considered, but rather out of a reluctance, even an inability, to abandon deep-rooted and existentially vital illusions. In his private papers, under the rubric 'Theology

(mine)',¹⁷ Overbeck speculated that, far from being hypocritical, the religiously committed simply possessed endless resources for defending and holding on to their illusions. One might, of course, well ask: 'Where does the need for such illusions come from? Is that need itself not perhaps an indication of the likely truth or correspondence to reality of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular? Further, in his relentless unmasking and rejection of any defence of religion, could Overbeck not be seen as something of a sceptical fossil left over from the "era of suspicion"?¹⁸ Such objections to Overbeck's thought are certainly not arbitrary, but neither are they entirely convincing. For one thing, humanity's 'metaphysical need' (Schopenhauer) was only too well known to Overbeck, as much of his writing attests. Like Kierkegaard or Pascal, he wrote out of it, rather than – as theologians frequently do – simply about it. For that reason, he can convey what it is like to be traversing a crisis, where others merely invoke the concept of a crisis. His scepticism is moving, as truth always is, whereas pious humbug and intellectual complacency, if present in theology, reveal only an absence of the proverbial evangelical salt. Unlike Kierkegaard or Pascal, however, Overbeck did not find in Christianity an answer to humanity's 'metaphysical need'. Yet his writings on religion do have a certain edge that is missing in blander forms of theology, perhaps because he does not have any safety net suspended between himself and the abyss.

This brings us to a second reason for taking Overbeck's thought seriously. The first, we recall, was that his writings reveal a mind attempting to grapple with what was, in his view, Christianity's increasingly precarious situation in the modern world. For Overbeck was nothing if not sensitive to the power of the intellectual and cultural forces constituting modernity, and his assessment of the contest between Christianity and modernity is, to say the least, instructive. But he was also sensitive to what he took to be constitutive of Christianity. His understanding of Christianity, his 'theology' if you will, is powerfully argued and difficult to refute. Indeed, what makes Overbeck's debate with Christianity so compelling is the fact that he offers an alternative and persuasive explanation of a tradition he knew so intimately and that had clearly left its mark on

14. Quoted by Michael Hamburger, *Contraries: Studies in German Literature* (New York, 1970), 6.

15. Cf., for example, the references given in M. Henry, *On not understanding God* (Dublin, 1997), 16.

16. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. W. Wood, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), 23. For a brief comment on this passage, see M. Henry, op. cit., 265f.

17. The passage in question was incorporated by Overbeck's former pupil C. A. Bernoulli in his not entirely reliable edition of excerpts from the *Nachlass*, published as *Christentum und Kultur* (Basel, 1919). A critical edition of this material can now be found in WN, Vol. 6/1 (cf. above, n. 10). The passage in question occurs on pages 329f. of this new edition, and on page 290 of Bernoulli's edition. In its original formulation in Overbeck's papers it can also be consulted in WN, Vol. 5, *Kirchenlexikon. Texte, Ausgewählte Artikel* 1-2, ed. B. von Rebinitz in collaboration with M. Stauffacher-Schanh (1995), 496. See also M. Henry, *Frant Overbeck: Theologian?* (Frankfurt a/M, 1995), ch. 6, n. 170.

18. The title of an essay by Nathalie Sarraute, echoing an observation made by Stendhal in 1832, as reported by Gabriel Jospovicci, *On Trust: Art and the Temptations of Suspicion* (New Haven and London, 1999), 6f., 276. With a vast range of reference over the entire history of Western literature and thought, Jospovicci in this work unravels the changing interpretations of 'trust' and 'suspicion', notions that have a resonance with Overbeck's problematic.

him. In its original form, Overbeck saw Christianity as a faith that could only live authentically in contradistinction to history, *etsi mundus non laetetur*, so to say.¹⁹ Such a belief, he judged, was only for a short time possible, but inevitably the reality of the world and its darkness eclipsed the faith that had sought to transcend it, and subsequently Christianity could only survive as an uncompromising warning to humanity of the truth of our inescapable finitude and mortality (*memento mori*), a warning not simply spelt out in words but above all lived out in the form of an ascetical attitude to existence and a refusal of all worldliness. Overbeck did not withhold his admiration for what he took to be the genuine otherworldliness of early Christianity, but he considered Christianity's ascetical demands to be ultimately excessive and inhuman, just as he held 'embryonic' or primitive Christianity to be 'impossible in the real world' (*weltunmöglich*). His many-layered scepticism with regard to Christianity is clearly not tantamount to a superficial shrug of the shoulders.

Nietzsche, too, it is worth recalling, was impressed by the vigour of early Christianity, which he sought to diagnose, partly, in psychological terms. The ambivalence of Nietzsche's attitude to early Christianity is highlighted in the following comments on *Beyond Good and Evil* (a book dealing with, among other things, Christian morality):

Although he despised the moral values taught by traditional Christianity, Nietzsche nonetheless admitted the psychological self-discipline of the Christian saints. Religious phenomena fascinated him. The faith demanded of early Christians, a rarely attained reality, provides an example possessing peculiarly tough and lasting appeal. Nietzsche writes that contemporary men lack the corresponding toughness to appreciate the paradoxical statement of faith: God dies on a cross. Early Christian faith demanded qualities found in a modern Pascal, according to Nietzsche.²⁰

For all their differences, underlying the critique of Christianity in both Overbeck and Nietzsche (and Kierkegaard too, one might add) is the assumption that modern people – with exceedingly rare and problematic

19. It could, of course, be argued against Overbeck (cf., for example, A. Urs Sommer, *Der Geist der Historie und das Ende des Christentums*, 88, n. 32; 92, n. 41) that his vision of original Christianity as being a non-historical and non-cultural phenomenon, is itself unrealistic and unconvincing. It could be contended that his view of what constituted pristine Christianity represents precisely one cultural possibility among others in which religion can find (and has found) expression. Yet the undeniable fact that 'worldliness' still has a negative ring to it in Christian culture suggests that Overbeck's basic intuition about Christianity's theoretical claim to be 'unworldly' is not totally his invention. Similarly, to argue that Overbeck's position represents merely an exacerbated version of a characteristically Lutheran idealisation of original Christianity and that it should for that reason not be taken too seriously, begs the question of whether or not there exists a 'normative' interpretation of Christianity to which appeal can be made, or whether one should rather just affirm uncritically, and glory in, any situation the Christian Church may find itself in, simply because it has come into historical existence.

20. Frank N. Magill (ed.), *Masterpieces of World Philosophy* (New York, 1990), 428f.

exceptions, like Pascal – are imaginatively incapable, so to speak, of grasping the true nature of Christianity, and hence that contemporary 'Christianity' is a misnomer, a self-misinterpretation. Nietzsche himself indeed did not draw the line at modern Christianity but extended it back, with a typically full-blooded rhetorical flourish, to take in the whole history of the Christian Church: 'The "Christian", that which has been called Christian for two millennia, is merely a psychological self-misunderstanding.'²¹ But it was Nietzsche's conviction about the divergence between modern and pristine Christianity that Overbeck emphasised in his own reflections: 'The most salutary and the most acceptable aspect of Nietzsche's anti-Christianity, is his radical and unambiguous sense of the modern age's profound alienation from Christianity. Thus he can exclaim in relation to the evangelical "counsel" to "become like children": "Oh how far we are from this psychological naïveté!"'²²

Even though Overbeck and Nietzsche reacted very differently to the pervasive crisis of their times, they both shared an acute sense of being part of a culture drifting irretrievably away from its religious and intellectual moorings. In seeking to cope with their common plight within a disorientated culture in a process of transition, they are at one with so many other figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Musil, or Hermann Broch,²³ that their intellectual trajectories can be justly regarded as having a certain exemplary or symptomatic value. At the primary source of the prevailing crisis many commentators would place the dominant figure of Hegel, who both analysed and helped to create the existential restlessness of modern times. In assessing the achievement of Hegel, whom he views as 'the true philosopher of the modern consciousness', Roger Scruton refers to 'the profound spiritual crisis that Hegel was striving to describe' as 'the crisis of a civilisation that has discovered the God upon whom it depended to be also its own creation.'²⁴ Both Overbeck and Nietzsche, and at a slightly earlier period Kierkegaard, are manifestly marked by, indeed are children of, this crisis. And despite their common anti-Hegelianism, they all appear to have absorbed much of the pathos of Hegel's philosophy of history. For Hegel, history itself becomes a divine self-sacrifice, rather than being 'simply' a created reality in which, as Christianity had traditionally taught, a divine sacrifice was believed to have been made. The loss of divine transcendence entailed by this vision, or rather the transference of divine or total meaning into the historical process itself, that

21. E. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1990), § 39, 161.

22. WN, Vol. 7/2, *Autobiographisches: "Meine Freunde Treitschke, Nietzsche und Rohde"*, ed. B. von Rehnitz and M. Stauffacher-Schaub (1999), 51; the Nietzsche reference is to a passage from the Leipzig (1901) edition of *The Will to Power*. The passage in question, which dates from autumn 1887, is now published in E. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Vol. 12, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Munich, 1988), 574.

23. See M. Henry, *Frantz Overbeck: Theologian?* (1995), 13–17.

24. R. Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (London/New York, 1995), 175.

characterises the Hegelianised version of Christianity, emerges in different ways as variations on a fundamental theme in Nietzsche, Overbeck, and Kierkegaard, and lends their writings an engaging quality of immediacy and a kind of almost innocent urgency – an afterglow, as it were, of the 'death of God'.

One may still wish to ask, in relation to Overbeck, why one should deal at all with specifically theological material from a world that has long since vanished, rather than, say, with Overbeck's reminiscences of Nietzsche,²⁵ which might appear to be of more obvious and wider appeal, and hence more worthy of being translated? The simple answer must be that in his programmatic work, *Christlichkeit*, Overbeck raised questions about the meaning and credibility – even possibility – of Christianity in his own time and place that were not answered. While much has changed in the modern world since the 1870s, Overbeck's questions have not – nor have they gone away. Now if one believes that 'real' questions can only be asked if those questions are ultimately reactions to what provokes and in some sense must transcend them,²⁶ then Overbeck's questions deserve to be heard. Indeed even if one suspects that those questions can never be definitively answered, that is still no 'reason' to dismiss them. For questions that are unanswerable are not necessarily meaningless. And moreover, it is also worth recalling that just as not to be able to refute a belief does not make it true, so not to be able to prove a belief does not make it false.

According to an old German pietist tag, 'to think is to thank' (*Denken ist Danken*). From this perspective, to attempt to think about 'ultimate' questions is to 'believe in' or to presuppose the value of these questions and, even more so, the value of what provokes them. And such an attitude is finally one of gratitude for or trust in the world in which we live, for the time being, a trust which can allow any question to be asked, free from fear. Not to want to ask ultimate questions would be to reveal a lack of belief in their significance and 'rightness' or legitimacy, while to be afraid to ask them might betray a suspicion that pursuing such questions can only lead us to a reality that is at best indifferent, or maybe even hostile, to human beings. Overbeck, at the very least, forces us to try to understand once again what Christianity might be, rather than lazily to assume we can identify it with what we always imagined it was or would

like to think it is. He also forces us to keep open a further, and surely more difficult or taxing question, namely whether we can live with what we may eventually come to see Christianity really is, rather than simply accept it intellectually, with no existential strings attached.

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Although the translation for which the present article is an introduction,²⁷ is a translation of only the first chapter of Overbeck's short book, *Christlichkeit*, nevertheless that chapter can perhaps, of all the chapters in the book, stand alone as an accessible and unique statement of Overbeck's general views on theology and religion. Before 1873, Overbeck had published specialised work only, the most substantial being a Commentary on Acts.²⁸ And indeed, after the publication of *Christlichkeit*, which failed to generate the kind of open debate on the meaning of Christianity in the modern world that he seems to have wanted to promote, he did not – until, that is to say, the second edition of *Christlichkeit* in 1903 – ever again publish anything of a general theological nature. Overbeck's friendship with Nietzsche had an important bearing both on his decision to write his tract, and on specific aspects of its content, as well as on its general tenor.²⁹ Overbeck had come to know Nietzsche in Basel in 1870, and in later life acknowledged the latter's influence on him to have been the 'strongest of its kind' that he ever experienced.³⁰ It was also with Nietzsche's help (and Richard Wagner's recommendation, at Nietzsche's request) that Overbeck's tract was published in 1873 simultaneously with the first of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*,³¹ by Wagner's publisher, Ernst Wilhelm Fritsch, in Leipzig.³² *Christlichkeit*, as Niklaus Peter's reminds us, and as Overbeck himself indicated,³³ was written in the short period of the Easter vacation of 1873. It is not the fruit of many years of elaborate preparation. But neither, of course, did it come entirely 'out of the blue'. In the 'Foreword' to the first

27. See above, n. 1.

28. *Kurze Erklärung der Apostelgeschichte*, von W.M.L. de Wette, 4. Aufl., bearbeitet und stark erweitert von Franz Overbeck (Leipzig, 1870).

29. In the 'Introduction' to *Chr.*, Overbeck mentions Nietzsche's frequent strong 'demands' ('Sommatationen', p. 16) to join in the cultural criticism he was then planning. Nietzsche himself referred to Overbeck's tract and the first of his own *Untimely Meditations* (*Untimely Meditations*) as 'twins' (*ibid.*, 18). Among others, Heidegger – in the 'Vorwort' to the 1970 edition of *Phänomenologie und Theologie* (Frankfurt a/M., 1970), 8 – has drawn attention to the 'family resemblance', as it were, between Overbeck's tract (which Overbeck himself did not refer to in the diminutive form in the first edition, as might be mistakenly inferred from Heidegger's 'Foreword') and the first of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*. The lecture 'Phenomenology and Theology' was first given in 1927; see *The Pivots of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger*, tr. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington and London, 1976), 3f.

30. See the 'Introduction' to *Chr.*, 13ff.

31. See *Chr.*, 17f.

32. See Niklaus Peter's introduction to *Ueber die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie*, 1873/1903, in WN, Vol. 1, 155ff., esp. 157. (The early 1870s were the period of Nietzsche's closest relationship with Wagner, who was then living in Switzerland.)

33. *Ibid.*, 156f.

25. Now available in WN, Vol. 7/2, 25–221.

26. If one wished to give this notion a specifically religious twist, one might think of Pascal's well-known saying: 'You would not seek me if you did not possess me' (*Pensées*, §929, tr. A.J. Krailsheimer, Harmonsworth, 1983, 320; cf. § 919). The notion itself, however, does not have to be given a positive religious interpretation. From a religious perspective, it seems in fact to cut both ways, depending on what inalienable convictions one may find oneself possessed of. When the French writer, Henry de Monttherant, judged Pascal partly responsible for his own loss of religious faith, he turned Pascal's famous phrase against him, remarking sardonically: 'You would not lose me [faith], if you had not lost me' (from 'Carnets XIX', in *Essais*, Paris, 1963, 994, a passage alluded to by Reinhold Schneider, *Winter in Wien*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1958, 68, to whom I owe the reference).

edition, Overbeck certainly mentions some proximate reasons for writing his tract,³⁴ but he also speaks of his long-felt need to express publicly his own attitude towards key theological questions.³⁵ The confessional note that is conspicuous in *Christlichkeit* – as in much of the *Nachlaß* – owes something, one imagines, to the Lutheranism in which Overbeck was raised,³⁶ while his unusual independence of judgement in matters of religion may be not unrelated to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of his early years. To grant this is certainly not to say anything about the truth of

34. He singled out two recent publications as catalysts for his own thought: 'Paul de Lagarde's essay *On the Relationship of the German State to Theology, Church and Religion* [*Über das Verhältnis des deutschen Staates zu theologischer, kirchlicher und religiöser [sic] (Göttingen, 1873)*], with its attack on our theological faculties' and 'Strauss's *Confession* [*Der alte und der neue Glaube. Ein Bekenntnis* (Leipzig, 1872)]' (Chr., IX). D.F. Strauss, author of the controversial *Life of Jesus* (1835/6), is still relatively well known. Lagarde, less so. Paul Anton de Lagarde (1827–1891) was professor of Oriental Languages at Göttingen from 1869 until his death. He is now perhaps better remembered for his intemperate criticism of many aspects of nineteenth-century religious thought. Orthodox Protestantism he found sterile, and the modernised interpretation of Christianity which developed in Germany, largely under the influence of Schleiermacher, he dismissed contemptuously: 'In the morning Schleiermacher played religion on the G string and in the afternoon philosophy on the D string, on request the other way around ... Schleiermacher's death did not so much create a gap as it showed that the abyss which even then was yawning had not been bridged by him for the educated classes but had merely been veiled ["verschleiert"] – a pun on Schleiermacher's name!' (P. de Lagarde, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Paul Fischer, Munich, 1924, 17, cited by Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, Berkeley, 1961, reprint 1974, 36f.). Lagarde's own notion of a new nationalistic, 'Germanic' religion to replace Christianity held no interest for Overbeck. This is hardly surprising, given Overbeck's unequivocal admiration for the European Enlightenment, a movement Lagarde despised (see Stern, op. cit., 277f.). But it is easy to see how Overbeck would have reacted positively to Lagarde's perception of any conceivable form of Christianity as now obsolete. While it is true that Overbeck specifically rejected Lagarde's solution to modern religious problems, which included a suggestion to abolish theology faculties in German universities and to replace them with departments of religious studies, yet, as Niklaus Peter has shown (*Im Schatten der Modernität. – Franz Overbecks Weg zur 'Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie'*, Stuttgart/Weimar, 1992, 178f.), his initial reactions to Lagarde's proposals were rather more enthusiastic than would appear from the evidence of Chr., ch. 5. Overbeck's correspondence with Lagarde has been published: see Niklaus Peter and Andreas Urs Sommer (eds.), 'Franz Overbecks Briefwechsel mit Paul de Lagarde', in *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte*, 3 (1996), 127–171. On Lagarde, see also Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian?* (1995), ch. 1, n. 76; ch. 2, nn. 29, 44.

35. In the *Einleitung* [introduction] to Chr., written in 1902, Overbeck also retrospectively draws attention to the pressure ('dem ... empfundenen Drang') he felt at the earlier period to find a 'clearer and more comprehensive' sense of intellectual direction (p. 16).

36. In a lecture of 1923, Thomas Mann made the following illuminating observations on the role of interiority in German culture which find some corroboration in Overbeck's writings, marked as they are by an unmistakable commitment to the subjective demands of truth: 'The finest characteristic of the typical German, the best-known and also the most flattering to his self-esteem, is his inwardness ... The inwardness, the culture (*Bildung*) of a German implies introspectiveness; an individualistic cultural conscience; consideration for the careful tending, the shaping, deepening and perfecting of one's own personality or, in religious terms, for the salvation and justification of one's own life; subjectivism in the things of the mind, therefore, a type of culture that might be called pietistic, given to autobiographical confession and deeply personal, one in which the world of the objective, the political world, is felt to be profane and is thrust aside with indifference, "because", as Luther says, "this external order is of no consequence"' (quoted in W. H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, Cambridge, 1975, vii).

what Overbeck has to say. That is a separate issue. As regards Overbeck's 'Lutheranism', however, it is surely important in evaluating his writings to take some account of the attraction that can be exercised by introspective writing, with its persuasive, even seductive human immediacy. Subjectively powerful writing of this kind can tend to overshadow, perhaps unjustifiably, other modes of discourse, that claim to deal with objective realities, over which no one has any control and to which no one has any direct or immediate access. The Bible for the most part appears to belong in the latter category.³⁷ If this were true, it would have important consequences for an evaluation of Overbeck's theology. At a later stage, I hope to return to this question.

* * *

To conclude this brief introduction to Overbeck's life and thought, a brief outline of his biography may be helpful. Overbeck's background was not that of a typical nineteenth-century German theologian, which tended to be clerical or academic. He was born in St Petersburg in 1837, the son of a German Protestant father and a French Catholic mother, and raised in the Lutheran confession of his father.³⁸ His father belonged to a German merchant family that had moved from England to Russia after the Napoleonic wars.³⁹ He came, thus, from the 'German trading classes' spread throughout Eastern Europe, who 'prided themselves on their civic liberties and on the high level of their culture as citizens of the world',⁴⁰ but did not identify themselves with the peoples among whom they lived. For, despite his cosmopolitan upbringing, Overbeck remained a German in culture, in the specific sense that he retained throughout his life an undiluted admiration for the *Aufklärung* and for the humane values of classical German philosophy and literature,⁴¹ coupled with an unrelenting dedication to scholarship, and an intense, brooding, intellectual integrity.

Apart from a short period (1846–48) during which he attended the *Ancien Collège de St. Germain* at St. Germain en Laye near Paris, Overbeck spent his early years in Russia. In 1850 his family moved back to Germany and settled in Dresden. There Overbeck was educated at the *Kreuzschule*, where his future friend, the historian and politician Heinrich von Treitschke, had also been a pupil. Subsequently, from 1856, he studied theology at Leipzig, Göttingen, Berlin, and Jena. He remained in Jena from 1864–70 as a *Privatdozent* ('unsalaried lecturer'), turning down in 1867 a call to a professorship in Gießen, partly because he had no great desire to be a professor, and partly also because the position at Gießen involved being the University Preacher, a role he felt he could no longer

37. Cf. G. Josipovici, *On Trust*, ch. 2.

38. Cf. F. Overbeck, *Selbstbekenntnisse*, ed. and intro. Eberhard Vischer (Basel, 1941), 79f. The material published in this work stems from the period of Overbeck's retirement, (cf. *ibid.*, 61).

39. See C.A. Bernoulli, 'Franz Overbeck', *Basler Jahrbuch*, 1906, 137.

40. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London, 1945), 29, cf. 31f.

41. Cf. Chr., 108, 114f. See also *Selbstbekenntnisse*, 167.

fulfil.⁴² In 1870, Overbeck finally accepted a call to become associate professor (*ausserordentlicher Professor*) for New Testament and Early Church History at Basel, and in the following year was appointed full professor (*ordentlicher Professor*), a post he held until his early retirement in 1897. He died in Basel in 1905.⁴³

42. Cf. C.A. Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine Freundschaft, 2 vols.* (Jena, 1908), I, 25; Horst Althaus, *Friedrich Nietzsche. Das Leben eines Genies im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a./M. – Berlin, 1993, originally published 1985), 169.

43. The above brief outline of Overbeck's life is based on M. Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian?* (1995), ch. 1.