

Franz Overbeck: A Review of Recent Literature (Part 1): *ITQ*, vol. 72, 2007, 391-404.

Martin Henry

St Patrick's College, Maynooth

In the light of some recent publications, this review article, which will appear in two parts, considers the writings of the Basel theology professor, Franz Overbeck (1837-1905), whose sceptical critique of the Christian tradition and particularly of its theology has been attracting more attention in the last quarter of a century.

KEYWORDS: *Christlichkeit, Kirchenlexicon*, eschatology, Nietzsche, modernity

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 3-476-01615-3.¹

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

¹ 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 3-05-003112-3.²

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 3-11-013023-8.³

The critique of theology associated with the name of Franz Overbeck has lost none of its edge or its potential to irritate. As Professor of New Testament and Early Church History in Basel from 1870 until his early retirement in 1897, Overbeck dissected the theology of the past and that of his professional contemporaries in a way that to this day has remained unparalleled in its acuity and range. The name – ‘Monsieur le Vivisecteur’ – that the young Robert Musil applied to himself in his *Tagebücher*⁴ could, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to Overbeck. In David Tracy’s words: ‘Overbeck’s friend Nietzsche used a hammer against theology; Overbeck himself used a scalpel. And Overbeck is finally the deeper challenge for theology itself.’⁵ Overbeck’s quarrel was not principally with Christianity (here he differs from Nietzsche), but with theology. As he wrote in his private papers: ‘The role played in

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

³ Henceforth this volume will be cited as: *Briefwechsel*.

⁴ Quoted in Gottfried Hierzenberger (ed.), *Unterwegs zum Menschen* (Munich: Pfeiffer, 1970), 16.

⁵ In the foreword to Martin Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian? Religion and History in the Thought of Franz Overbeck* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), x.

the world by the church and Christianity is something that, in a certain sense, never was, and is not now, any of my business. But I have always thought and I still think that theology has never done anything but harm.’⁶ Overbeck’s critique of theology continues to provoke and frustrate, no doubt partly because no obvious or fully convincing answer to it has been forthcoming. The ambiguity of Overbeck’s own position, moreover, only compounds the problem. For he reflects in his own life an ambivalent mixture of undying concern for the real meaning of Christianity, coupled with rejection of the legitimacy of theology, that perhaps exposes him to a similar kind of critique as that which he mounted so relentlessly against other theologians. A concern for the true meaning of Christianity is, after all, surely a theological task, even though it must also be recognized that this is precisely what Overbeck would have disputed: for him, it would have been a ‘purely historical’ question.

For most of the twentieth century Overbeck was mentioned, if at all, in connection with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), with whom he had become friendly in 1870, the year he moved to the University of Basel (Nietzsche had been appointed Professor of Classical Philology at the same university the previous year). It was, for example, Overbeck who, alerted by Jacob Burckhardt, travelled to Turin to rescue Nietzsche and bring him back to Basel after his collapse into madness in early January 1889. But in recent decades, Overbeck has begun to emerge from the shadows of his association with Nietzsche and to be seen as an intellectual personality in his own right.

⁶ See Martin Henry, ‘Franz Overbeck on Carl Albrecht Bernoulli,’ *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68 (2003): 392 [translation modified in the above quotation].

Overbeck's Early Influence on Theology

In the specifically theological world, Overbeck's influence on Karl Barth is well documented,⁷ if somewhat problematic, as we shall see later. More securely rooted in Overbeck's actual thought is Werner Kümmel's recognition of its significance for the study of the New Testament.⁸ Curiously, Albert Schweitzer, in his celebrated work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, has nothing to say about Overbeck's radical view of the origins of Christianity. Overbeck interpreted Christianity as emerging from an apocalyptic belief in the imminent end of the world – a theme usually linked inextricably with the name of Albert Schweitzer – as early as 1873 (the date of the first edition of Overbeck's classic text, *Ueber die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie*⁹). And, as can now be seen in the new, handsomely

⁷ See, for example, Hermann Schindler, *Barth und Overbeck* (Gotha: Leopold Klotz, 1936; reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft [=WBG], 1974); Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth. A Theological Legacy*, tr. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 54-70; German original in *Barth-Studien* (Zurich: Benziger, 1982).

⁸ See Werner G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, tr. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (London: SCM, 1973), 199-205, 434-35.

⁹ Franz Overbeck, *Ueber die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie. Streit- und Friedensschrift* (Leipzig: Fritsch, 1873). This work is reprinted, in a critical edition with an introduction, in *OWN I*, 155-256. The extra material (Preface, Introduction, and a three-part Postscript) added to the second edition can be found in *OWN I*, 257-318. Overbeck removed the original subtitle from the second edition:

produced edition of his works and literary remains (some volumes of which are here under review), *Werke und Nachlaß*, he had at an even earlier stage argued for the significance of eschatology, or, more precisely, for the significance of the non-fulfilment of early Christian eschatological hopes, as one of the motivating factors behind the beginnings of Christian monasticism. This was in a lecture (one of the so-called *Rosenvorträge*) he gave in 1867 in Jena while still a *Privatdozent*, but not published before its inclusion in *OWN I*.

Still within the world of formal theology, the Bonn New Testament scholar, Philipp Vielhauer (1914-77), recognized and underlined Overbeck's abiding importance for the study of the New Testament and early Christian literature, and appreciated his uncompromising honesty. In large part thanks to Vielhauer, who was one of Gerd Theißen's teachers (his *Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben* [1978] is dedicated to Philipp Vielhauer), Overbeck's influence and spirit of independent, honest, and radical thought are still alive in German-language theology. Klaus Berger, for his part, devoted a chapter to Overbeck and Nietzsche in his *Exegese und Philosophie*,¹⁰ investigating the connection between exegesis and the wider intellectual commitments of both thinkers.

Overbeck's More Extended Influence

Ueber die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie (Leipzig: Naumann, 1903). Both editions will henceforth be cited as: *Christlichkeit*.

¹⁰ Klaus Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1986), Ch. IV.

Outside the theological guild, Overbeck has also been a significant figure for writers and thinkers like Walter Benjamin, who, in an effort to offset the then dominant Nazi perversion of German culture, concluded an anthology of letters by various Germans he admired with one by Overbeck to Nietzsche,¹¹ and Thomas Mann, who mentions Overbeck in his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918) and may, Andreas Urs Sommer argues in the book included for review in this article,¹² have had him in mind as one of the models for his narrator-figure, Serenus Zeitblom, in *Doctor Faustus* (1947), a novel inspired in part by the life and philosophy of Nietzsche; more significantly, *Doctor Faustus*, Chapter XI, contains reflections on one of Overbeck's key themes (the clash between religious belief and theology), which may have been to some extent at least inspired by Mann's reading of Overbeck.¹³

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Deutsche Menschen. Eine Folge von Briefen*, 2. Aufl. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965), mit einem Nachwort von Theodor W. Adorno; (originally published under the pseudonym: 'Detlev Holz,' Lucerne, 1936).

¹² Sommer, *Der Geist der Historie und das Ende des Christentums*, 46, n. 8.

¹³ See Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 571, n. 40 (the relevant passage reads: 'In my view, liberal theology is a *contradictio in adjecto*. . . . A proponent of culture, ready to adapt itself to the ideas of bourgeois society, it degrades the religious to a function of the human . . . an ethical progressiveness.') In this study, Gossman studies four modern critics of modernity who worked in nineteenth-century Basel: Burckhardt, Bachofen, Nietzsche, and Overbeck.

Among philosophers, one could mention, besides Walter Benjamin, Karl Löwith, who devoted the concluding chapter (of the final section) of his *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1941) to Overbeck, a scholar whose integrity he admired; Hans Albert, who acknowledged Overbeck as a writer on theology from whom he had ‘profited considerably’;¹⁴ and Martin Heidegger, who referred to Overbeck as a significant writer ‘for the few who think among the countless who merely calculate,’¹⁵ as he put it, somewhat sniffily, in 1970. Finally, one could recall in this context the Jewish philosopher of religion, Jacob Taubes, who was interested enough in Overbeck to publish a second edition of his *Selbstbekenntnisse* [‘Confessions’] – originally published by Eberhard Vischer in 1941¹⁶ – with a new introduction, in 1966.¹⁷

¹⁴ Hans Albert, *Das Elend der Theologie. Kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Hans Küng* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1979), 42.

¹⁵ In the foreword to *Phänomenologie und Theologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1970); English translation in *The Piety of Thinking. Essays by Martin Heidegger*, tr. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 4 [the above translation has been modified]. Hans-Georg Gadamer recalls in his *Philosophische Lehrjahre* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), 37, how Heidegger appealed to Overbeck in a public discussion with Karl Barth’s friend, Eduard Turneyesen, in Marburg in the 1920s, challenging theology to fulfil its real function of speaking credibly about faith.

¹⁶ Franz Overbeck, *Selbstbekenntnisse*, ed. and introduced by Eberhard Vischer (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1941).

¹⁷ Franz Overbeck, *Selbstbekenntnisse*, with an introduction by Jacob Taubes (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1966).

Older Editions of Overbeck's Writings

The new Metzler edition of Overbeck is, as the editors point out,¹⁸ not the first enterprise of its kind in regard to his writings. At a much earlier date, the 'Franz-Overbeck-Stiftung' ['Franz-Overbeck-Foundation'] was established by the testament of his widow, Ida Overbeck, who died in 1933, to make Overbeck's writings, both those already published and his literary remains, available to a wider public. Overbeck's former student and friend, Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (1868-1937), suggested a five-part publication programme: (1) a selection of Overbeck's own translations of patristic works; (2) a reprinting of his early publications up to 1880; (3) a reprinting of later publications up to 1897, the year of his retirement; (4) his correspondence with Nietzsche, Rohde and possibly Treitschke and others; (5) an expanded edition of *Christentum und Kultur* ['Christianity and Culture'] (1919). Only one item from this ambitious project ever saw the light of day: Overbeck's translation of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*.¹⁹ And after Bernoulli's death (1937), the only publication from Overbeck's writings that appeared under the auspices of the *Overbeck-Stiftung*, though not as part of Bernoulli's original project, was a selection of Overbeck's autobiographical reflections, prepared by Eberhard Vischer.²⁰

¹⁸ Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Niklaus Peter, 'Vorwort,' *Schriften bis 1873*, *OWN I*, VIII f.

¹⁹ Titus Flavius Klemens von Alexandrien, *Die Teppiche (Stromateis)*. German text in the translation of Franz Overbeck, ed. and introduced by C. A. Bernoulli and Ludwig Früchtel (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1936).

²⁰ See above, n. 16.

At a much earlier period, indeed shortly after Overbeck's death, Bernoulli had already been active in promoting his former teacher's and friend's work. In conjunction with Overbeck's widow, he began to make available at the outset what he no doubt saw as the (for the general public) more immediately engaging aspects of Overbeck's writings, especially those dealing with Nietzsche. Overbeck himself had always abhorred the idea of 'exploiting' his friendship with Nietzsche in order to publicize his own writings, and consequently, in his own lifetime, published only a few, restrained remarks on Nietzsche in the introduction he wrote for the second edition of the *Christlichkeit*, that is to say in a context where such remarks were appropriate and not included for the purpose of self-advertising.²¹ But, as early as 1906, Bernoulli published Overbeck's recollections of Nietzsche,²² and also his letters

²¹ See Franz Overbeck, 'Einleitung,' *Christlichkeit, Schriften bis 1873, OWN 1*, 268-72. (Overbeck was also, in the years before his death, involved in some public controversy with Nietzsche's sister over her administration of her brother's literary estate, preferring to preserve his own picture of Nietzsche intact rather than aid and abet the burgeoning Nietzsche-cult in Germany.)

²² Franz Overbeck, 'Erinnerungen an Friedrich Nietzsche,' ed. C. A. Bernoulli, *Die neue Rundschau* 1 (1906): 209-31; 320-30. These two pieces have been translated into French: Franz Overbeck, *Souvenirs sur Friedrich Nietzsche*, tr. Jeanne Champeaux (Paris: Allia, 2000); some of Overbeck's reminiscences of Nietzsche, published in Franz Overbeck, *Autobiographisches, OWN 7/2*, have also been translated recently into Polish: Tadeusz Zatorski, 'Franz Overbeck, Wspomnienia o Nietzschem,' *Kresy. Kwartalnik Literacki* 4 (2004): 16-27.

to Peter Gast²³ (pseudonym of the composer Heinrich Köselitz [1854-1918], Nietzsche's friend and quasi-secretary over many years, and later collaborator with Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth, in the latter's more than dubious editing of her brother's writings), again no doubt because of the Nietzsche-connection, and followed this up two years later with a massive two-volume study of the friendship between Overbeck and Nietzsche.²⁴ In 1907, Bernoulli also published Overbeck's letters to the historian Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-96) and to the classical philologist and close student friend of Nietzsche, Erwin Rohde (1845-98).²⁵ The letters between Overbeck and Nietzsche himself, Bernoulli published in collaboration with Richard Oehler in 1916.²⁶

While Bernoulli, who was more a modern publicist than a scholar in Overbeck's tradition, did concentrate initially on the 'Nietzsche angle' of Overbeck's writings, he by no means entirely neglected the latter's scholarly works, it is only fair

²³ Franz Overbeck, 'Briefe an Peter Gast,' ed. C. A. Bernoulli, *Die neue Rundschau* 1 (1906): 26-51. (These letters are now published in the critical edition of Overbeck's and Köselitz's correspondence [*Briefwechsel*].)

²⁴ Carl Albrecht Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine Freundschaft*, 2 vols. (Jena: Diederichs, 1908).

²⁵ Franz Overbeck, 'Briefe an Heinrich von Treitschke und Erwin Rohde,' ed. C. A. Bernoulli, *Die neue Rundschau* 2 (1907): 863-82.

²⁶ *Friedrich Nietzsches Briefwechsel mit Franz Overbeck*, ed. Richard Oehler and C. A. Bernoulli (Leipzig: Insel, 1916).

to add. In 1911 he published a volume on the Fourth Gospel,²⁷ compiled from the papers on this theme Overbeck had left in his *Nachlaß*. An investigation of the exegesis of the Fourth Gospel was one of the specific projects Overbeck had intended pursuing after his early retirement from teaching. And some years later, using Overbeck's lecture-manuscripts and some material from the *Kirchenlexicon*²⁸ (see below), Bernoulli published a study of the origins and evolution of medieval scholasticism.²⁹ Two years later appeared what was undoubtedly the most controversial of Bernoulli's posthumous Overbeck publications, *Christentum und Kultur*,³⁰ about which more will be said below.

Apart from the publishing endeavours of Bernoulli and Vischer, the *Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft* in Darmstadt played a constructive role in reprinting both many of the seminal items Overbeck himself had managed to publish in his own lifetime, and also the works *Christentum und Kultur* (in 1963) and *Vorgeschichte und Jugend der mittelalterlichen Scholastik* (in 1971). In the former category, mention should be made of the WBG's reprints of the second (1903) edition

²⁷ Franz Overbeck, *Das Johannesevangelium. Studien zur Kritik seiner Erforschung*, ed. C. A. Bernoulli (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1911).

²⁸ See Barbara von Reibnitz, 'Einleitung,' *Kirchenlexicon*, OWN 4, XV.

²⁹ Franz Overbeck, *Vorgeschichte und Jugend der mittelalterlichen Scholastik*, ed. C. A. Bernoulli (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1917; reprint Darmstadt, WBG, 1971).

³⁰ Franz Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur. Gedanken und Anmerkungen zur modernen Theologie*, ed. C. A. Bernoulli (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1919, reprint Darmstadt: WBG, 1963).

of the *Christlichkeit* (in 1963);³¹ *Studien zur Geschichte der alten Kirche* (in 1965, originally published 1875); *Zur Geschichte des Kanons* (in 1965, originally published 1880); *Über die Anfänge der Kirchengeschichtsschreibung* (in 1965, originally published 1892); *Über die Anfänge der patristischen Literatur* (in 1966, originally published 1882); and *Über die Auffassung der Streits des Paulus mit Petrus in Antiochien (Gal. 2, 11ff.) bei den Kirchenvätern* (in 1968, originally published 1877).

New Edition of Overbeck's Works

All of these previous publishing enterprises with regard to Overbeck's works have now been overtaken and surpassed by the new Metzler critical edition, which is in four main sections: (1) vols. 1-3 cover material Overbeck himself published (vol. 3, which will contain writings Overbeck published between 1880 and 1898 and his book reviews, has still to appear); (2) vols. 4-6 are devoted to material from the

³¹ There is now an English translation of this edition of Overbeck's classic text: 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); see Lionel Gossman, 'Martin Henry's Translation of Franz Overbeck,' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 157-61. An earlier English translation appeared in 2002: Franz Overbeck, *On the Christianity of Theology*. Translated with an introduction and notes by John Elbert Wilson (San José, CA: Pickwick, 2002); see Andreas Urs Sommer's review of this translation (*Theologische Zeitschrift* 59 (2003): 375-6), which he finds erases the irony of Overbeck's text. The *Christlichkeit* also has been translated into Italian: *Sulla cristianità della teologia dei nostri tempi*, tr. and ed. Antonia Pellegrino (Pisa: Edizioni Ets, 2000).

Kirchenlexicon,³² itself a substantial section of a wider series of so-called *Collectaneen* [‘miscellaneous notes and reflections’] that Overbeck compiled over his entire academic career. The *Kirchenlexicon* is arranged in encyclopaedic form, and was intended for use as the quarry for Overbeck’s projected, but never written, *profane Kirchengeschichte* (‘secular [or non-religious] history of the church’). The *Kirchenlexicon*³³ constitutes the section of the *Collectaneen* that Bernoulli used as by far his largest source in compiling *Christentum und Kultur*, although some brief articles on the synoptic question (from A 207, which belongs to the New Testament material in the *Collectaneen*) were also included in Bernoulli’s original compilation,

³² The theological *Nachlaß* was first catalogued by Martin Tetz (*Overbeckiana. Übersicht über den Franz-Overbeck-Nachlaß der Universitätsbibliothek Basel. II. Teil: Der wissenschaftliche Nachlaß Franz Overbecks*, beschrieben von Martin Tetz (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1962). Tetz used the system A 1, A 2, etc. up to A 412 to describe the various elements of the *Nachlaß*, which include reflections, notes, bibliographical information, books, lecture-manuscripts, etc. The *Collectaneen* cover items A 207-A 261, and are in three main sections: A 207-A 215 refer to New Testament items; A 216-A 241 contain the *Kirchenlexicon*; and A 242-A 261 contain Patristic items.

³³ The expression ‘Church Lexicon’ is something of a misnomer, since these voluminous reflections are in no narrow sense focused on specifically ecclesiastical matters, but, in line with Overbeck’s project of writing a secular history of the church, cover multiple aspects of church history in its literary, social, political, and cultural dimensions both in the past and in the present.

as they are in the *OWN* edition.³⁴ When one realizes that the two thick volumes *OWN* 4 and 5 represent only about five per cent of the totality of the *Kirchenlexicon*, it is clear that a complete publication of even the *Kirchenlexicon*, let alone of the entire *Nachlaß*, would not have been practicable. (3) vols. 7-8: vol. 7 (in two tomes, 7/1 and 7/2) makes available Overbeck's autobiographical writings and his personal reminiscences of his closest friends, Treitschke, Nietzsche, and Rohde, while vol. 8 will contain a selection of his letters and is due to be published in the near future; (4) vol. 9, the final volume, based on the manuscript of Overbeck's lectures on the history of the early church up to the Council of Nicaea,³⁵ was unfortunately not available to the reviewer in the preparation of this article.

This new edition of Overbeck's works and literary remains, which has been prepared by a distinguished group of scholars, based mainly in Switzerland (especially Basel, fittingly enough), will permit those who can read Overbeck's own words – English translations of Overbeck's writings are still scant – to gain access, as

³⁴ See Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, ed. C. A. Bernoulli, 78-80, and cf. Overbeck, 'Zum synoptischen Problem,' *Christentum und Kultur*, *OWN* 6/1, 110-13; see also Overbeck, 'Anhang,' *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 5, 681-94. Bernoulli also included small amounts of material from other parts of Overbeck's *Nachlaß*, mainly from some of his autobiographical notes (see Barbara von Reibnitz, 'Editorische Notiz,' *Christentum und Kultur*, *OWN* 6/1, VII, n. 1).

³⁵ Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlaß*, Band 9: *Aus den Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Alten Kirche bis zum Konzil von Nicaea 325 n. Chr.*, ed. Johann-Christoph Emmelius, Ekkehard W. Stegemann, Rudolf Brändle, and Hubert Cancik (Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2006).

never before, to his world and to the constantly fresh and troubling nature of his questions. But even when the full Metzler edition has been published, it will not provide an exhaustive collection of all Overbeck's published works, nor, of course, even less so, as just indicated, of his complete literary remains. Yet the latter would be neither desirable nor feasible, given the vast and unfinished nature of Overbeck's enormous theological *Nachlaß*. For reasons of space, no doubt, neither is the huge reworked version of de Wette's commentary on Acts, which Overbeck published in 1870 and which Vielhauer regarded as his greatest contribution to New Testament studies,³⁶ included in this multi-volume edition of his works.

Franz Overbeck, Werke und Nachlaß: Section 1

In the first section of the Metzler edition (volumes 1-3), at least in the case of the two volumes in this section published so far, the various items included are preceded by concise and illuminating notes on their origin, content, subsequent reception in the theological world, and on their original sources (published or unpublished). This section contains many key texts from Overbeck's early years in Jena and especially Basel, about which a few words should be said.

After having spent the years 1864-70 as a *Privatdozent* in Jena, Overbeck was appointed in 1870 to a new professorship of theology in Basel. The new chair had been established, as he discovered soon after his arrival, for the purpose of trying to make Christianity more relevant to modern conditions. The 'liberal' reforming elements in Basel Protestantism were soon disappointed in Overbeck's approach to

³⁶ See Ekkehard W. Stegemann, 'Einleitung,' *Schriften bis 1873, OWN 1*, 107.

the task envisaged for him, for he refused to get involved in any church political activities, under the mantle of ‘theology,’ preferring instead to tread a purely scholarly path. He saw his task as attempting to shed light on the, in his view, difficult, if not intractable, questions surrounding Christianity’s origins, evolution, and, above all, viability in the modern world.

Overbeck’s approach to the problems of contemporary Christianity was clear from his Inaugural Lecture in Basel, delivered in June 1870 (and last printed in 1875), which has been included in this first section of *OWN*. It takes up the specific question of the legitimacy within theology of an historical interpretation of the New Testament, and contains strong indications of how precarious Overbeck sensed Christianity’s existence to be in the modern world. Here, at an early stage in his public theological career, one can see how his scholarship has a practical or existential slant, which it never lost. Indeed, a constant feature of Overbeck’s writings is the way his scholarship, without ever seeking to be popular, was nevertheless always in the service of a practical ideal beyond that of pure scholarship. Yet he detested the way theologians would claim that their work was ‘for the people,’ since in his view it was self-evident that serious academic work could never be intended for anyone else.³⁷ In the Inaugural Lecture, he was of course interested in getting at the historical truth of the New Testament—not, however, as a matter of antiquarian curiosity, but rather as a matter of contemporary significance. He was, in other words, concerned to face up to the consequences historical truth about the origins of Christianity might or should have for adherence to Christianity in the changed conditions of modernity.

³⁷ See his polemical remarks on this subject in the preface to the *Studien zur Geschichte der alten Kirche* (Overbeck, ‘Vorwort,’ *Schriften bis 1880*, *OWN* 2, 18).

Overbeck was convinced that the modern world was experiencing the end, or the death-throes, of Christianity as a truly living religion, but was reluctant to face up to the cultural crisis this impending loss inevitably engendered. It was in particular the liberal theologians (in Basel and, by implication, in Germany too, above all – at a later stage – in the person of Harnack) whom he saw as being blind to the true seriousness of the religious crisis he felt in his own bones had engulfed Christianity. Writing towards the end of his life, he explained: ‘I wrote my tract *How Christian is Present-Day Theology?* in the conviction that our age is in the process of dismantling the church altogether and of seeking a completely new way of understanding Christianity, indeed a new way of understanding religion in general.’³⁸

While liberal, modernizing theologians were keen to use historical scholarship to investigate the history of the Christian tradition in the hope of thereby defending it, they seemed unaware of the consequences such scholarship, in Overbeck’s view, brought in its train. In the year following his Inaugural Lecture, he wrote to Treitschke: ‘From a scholarly point of view, I am much more radical than these people; in practice, their approach to things shows they have almost no idea of just how profoundly serious the issues involved really are, and then they concoct a religion of facile phrases for their own convenience.’³⁹

Overbeck’s radical stance towards religion and theology, clear to all in his Inaugural Lecture, was even more evident in the *Christlichkeit*, which is also

³⁸ See Henry, ‘Franz Overbeck on Carl Albrecht Bernoulli,’ 392.

³⁹ Quoted by Niklaus Peter, ‘Einleitung,’ *Schriften bis 1873, OVN 1*, 81.

republished in this new edition. In the case of the *Christlichkeit*, the editors have chosen to print the first edition separately from the additional material contained in the second (1903) edition. In this way, contemporary readers can read the short tract as it was originally penned, and appreciate its potency. In this short, programmatic work, Overbeck outlined his fundamental convictions about the incompatibility of faith and knowledge, and the radically ascetical, world-denying, eschatological essence of Christianity. These two convictions, he wrote to Treitschke in a letter of 14 November 1873, he found endorsed in the writings of Schopenhauer, though he held them independently of the latter.⁴⁰

Given Overbeck's thesis about the antagonism of faith and reason, it followed inevitably that all theology was in principle incompatible with genuine attachment to Christianity. Not just conservative (or 'apologetic,' in his terminology) or liberal theological versions of Christianity were untenable, but theology as such was, in his view, antagonistic to any religion. Indeed the appearance of theology was an infallible sign, in Overbeck's judgement, that the vital impulse underlying a religion was already in decline. This was, in his eyes, especially true in the case of Christianity, which emerged proclaiming the imminent End of the World, and hence could not have expected any history at all to follow, let alone a history of theological reflection. In general, for Overbeck, theology could at most be the undertaker or gravedigger of a religion, never its midwife or physician. In the final chapter of the tract, he did speak, it is true, about the possibility of a critical theology, which would at least protect Christianity from being misconstrued, but in the second edition (in the first section of

⁴⁰ Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche* 1, 91.

the long postscript⁴¹) he distanced himself even from this justification of theology. Yet his writings are so full of references to the pressing, religious crisis of his own times that it is surely possible to argue that he did at least implicitly assume there was still a practical role for theology in the modern world, namely as a ‘guide for the perplexed,’ so to speak, in the period of transition he was convinced western culture was traversing, as it sought to negotiate its farewell to a now defunct Christianity.

What complicates, however, Overbeck’s approach to Christianity (and, by implication, to theology) in the *Christlichkeit*, is that he is also critical of superficial substitutes for Christianity (which is how he judged D. F. Strauss’s *The Old Faith and the New*, discussed in the fourth chapter of the tract) and of suggestions, such as that made by Paul de Lagarde (dealt with in the fifth chapter of the tract), to remove confessional theology faculties from the university system and replace them by faculties of religious studies. Lagarde had imagined this move would prepare the way for the emergence of a new Germanic religion.

In the case of Strauss, respect for what Overbeck termed Christianity’s ‘approach to, or view of, life or the world’ [*Lebensbetrachtung / Weltbetrachtung*] seems to have been the guiding intuition behind his critique of Strauss’s ideas, while in the case of Lagarde his sense of the deep cultural connection between Christianity and the western intellectual tradition seems to have prompted his reluctance to endorse Lagarde’s proposals, all the more so as they clashed head-on with Overbeck’s notion that theology is always a consequence of a religion, never its initiator.

⁴¹ Overbeck, ‘Nachwort,’ *Christlichkeit, Schriften bis 1873, OWN 1*, 282-83.

He did also, of course, have intense suspicions of any form of nationalistic religion *à la Lagarde*. This may have been perhaps partly as a result of his own cosmopolitan background, as the son of a German Lutheran father and French Catholic mother, born in St Petersburg and raised there and near Paris, before, at the age of 13, moving with his family to Dresden. Whatever the ultimate reasons, Overbeck had a visceral aversion to any political exploitation of Christianity. Even Treitschke's enthusiastic return to Protestant Christianity, as the triumphant ideology of the German Reich established by Bismarck in 1871, was a major factor in the deterioration of their friendship. And, notoriously, Harnack's role as a *Hoftheologe* of the Kaiser was anathema to Overbeck, and one of the motives for the scorn he continued to heap on his theological colleague.

Some more attention, however, needs to be paid to the complexity of Overbeck's view of theology in his short tract, as this is a fundamental aspect of his thought. Two main elements are, it seems to me, involved in the complex relationship Overbeck maintained with theology and Christianity throughout his life. One is the potent mixture in his own personality of a commitment to the rational ideals of the Enlightenment combined with a romantic sensibility that is evident above all in the strict dichotomy he believed to exist between life and thought or between religion (faith) and reason, and hence between Christianity and theology. 'Man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he reflects,' as Hölderlin put it. For Hegel, philosophy, as the thought of the past or the past summed up in thought, always arises when the life of an era has ebbed away, and it can henceforth only be understood as dead knowledge, but never rejuvenated. The 'owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the

onset of dusk,'⁴² as his famous image has it. Similarly, for Overbeck, theology is the sure sign that a religion has begun to decay and will be unable to resist the corrosive acids of reason: once rational thought is allowed free rein, it is only a matter of time before one comes 'into the desolation of reality' (Yeats).⁴³

It is perhaps of some interest to note, in passing, that the dichotomy one finds in Overbeck's writings between faith and reason, or between religion (Christianity) and theology, is not confined to German thinkers. As the case of Yeats, for example, indicates, it is a wider European phenomenon. Even as allegedly 'cerebral' a thinker as Paul Valéry (1871-1945) reveals a curiously similar assessment of Christian theology to that of Overbeck. Reflecting in his *Cahiers* on what he perceived to be the Gospels' indifference to, if not contempt for, knowledge and culture, Valéry was puzzled by the attraction Christianity nevertheless evidently exerted over undoubted men of culture such as Ambrose of Milan or Augustine of Hippo, and, in this context, he expressed his own view that there is '*nothing less Christian than theology, nothing less Christian than all those analyses, debates, attempts to provide proofs, and to show*

⁴² Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. W. Wood, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 23.

⁴³ From the poem 'Meru' (William Butler Yeats, *Collected Poems* [London: Macmillan, 1977], 333). See also Yeats's remarks in a letter to Sturge Moore: 'Science is the criticism of myths, there would be no Darwin had there been no Book of Genesis, no electrons but for the Greek atomic myth, and when the criticism is finished there is not even a drift of ashes on the pyre . . . We free ourselves from obsession that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void' (cited in Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971], 409.)

how things fit into a pattern, which have absorbed so many minds—unless perhaps religious art.’⁴⁴ In another section of the *Cahiers*, the aphorism occurs: ‘The state dies of “politics” just as religion dies of theology.’⁴⁵ The contrast found in Valéry’s world view between rational thought and the assumed non-rationality, if not irrationality, of religion, especially Christianity, a contrast that owes much to the legacy of European Romanticism, is, as just mentioned, strikingly similar to one of the main convictions that characterize Overbeck’s enduring preoccupation with the ‘essence of Christianity,’ namely that faith in Christianity is necessarily incompatible with critical thought.

The second, and, I think, ultimately more pervasive and interesting, reason for Overbeck’s attack on theology was his growing sense of outrage throughout his ‘professional’ life at what he saw as theology’s betrayal of Christian ideals, which, with his apocalyptic interpretation of early Christianity, he held to be not of this world. In this wider context, it seems to me, one has to locate his contempt for his illustrious contemporary, Harnack; many of his comments on the latter can now be read in *OWN* 4 and 5. A flavour of his attitude is conveyed by his reference to Harnack as ‘a modern European prima donna’⁴⁶ on hearing of the latter’s intention to go on a lecture trip to the United States in 1904. On another occasion, on learning that

⁴⁴ Paul Valéry, *Cahiers* II, ed. Judith Robinson (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 640. (I am grateful to John Campbell for suggesting various improvements to the above translation.)

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1450.

⁴⁶ Overbeck, ‘Tagebuchartiges,’ *Autobiographisches*, *OWN* 7/1, 126; see also Overbeck, ‘Harnack und Arbeit,’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 4, 442-44.

Harnack had given a wide-ranging newspaper interview (the growth of the mass media was not an aspect of modernity Overbeck welcomed: rather, he would have seen it as part of the ‘filthy modern tide’ [Yeats]), he wrote sarcastically that what this showed was ‘nothing less than that we Protestants too have our Pope, and indeed one who is much “superior” to the Catholic Pope! Although we may not live in the “best world,” there are still a few jokes left in ours.’⁴⁷ What infuriated Overbeck even more in relation to Harnack was the latter’s political closeness to the German Kaiser, which drew from him the caustic remark that Harnack was ‘performing the function of a *friseur* of the Kaiser’s theological wig, just as Eusebius had done formerly with Constantine.’⁴⁸

There is more surely than ‘sour grapes’ or academic grouching behind such pointed comments. Overbeck’s sense of the dignity of his profession and his belief that the academic coinage of the modern world was being debased by the attempts of professors like Harnack to ingratiate themselves with ‘public opinion’ (one of Overbeck’s most acutely felt bugbears) may to some extent have fuelled his rage at modern theology. But his radically apocalyptic, world-renouncing interpretation of early Christianity—the aspect of Christianity that he judged was being most flagrantly ignored and trivialized by scholars like Harnack—would seem to offer a more cogent intellectual motive for his indignation. Yet such outrage and indignation can scarcely be regarded as a purely intellectual or academic phenomenon. Words like ‘treachery’

⁴⁷ Overbeck, ‘Theologie (moderne) Politik,’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 5, 552

⁴⁸ Overbeck, ‘Adolf Harnack,’ *Christentum und Kultur*, *OWN* 6/1, 246; cf.

Overbeck, ‘Harnack und der Kaiser,’ *Kirchenlexicon*, *OWN* 4, 531.

or ‘betrayal’⁴⁹ have moral, even, in this case, religious connotations, which Overbeck may not have wished to dwell on, but which can hardly be denied. Rather like Nietzsche, he viewed the whole Christian venture or the history of the Christian Church, with its seeking of power and prestige in the ‘real’ world, as a protracted betrayal of Christian ideals. And he regarded Christian theology as hypocritical because Christianity, in his view, is a renunciation of the world, whereas theology is a search for intellectual recognition and worldly success and influence. Yet how tenable is such a position, if, in Overbeck’s eyes, primitive Christianity itself is an illusion? We will pursue these and other issues in the second part of this article.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, the closing remarks of the postscript to the 1903 edition of the *Christlichkeit* (Overbeck, ‘Nachwort,’ *Christlichkeit, Schriften bis 1873, OWN 1*, 317-18).