

Translation of Franz Overbeck, *How Christian Is Our Present-day Theology?* (Chapter One)¹

This translation is the first to be published in English of any significant portion of Franz Overbeck's famous text, 'Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie'. In Chapter I of this work – translated here, together with the foreword to the original edition – Overbeck deals with the question of the general relationship between theology and Christianity.

Foreword to the First Edition

What has persuaded me to draw together some reflections on contemporary theology in this tract is, firstly, the publication of Paul de Lagarde's essay *On the Relationship of the German State to Theology, Church and Religion*,² with its attack on our theological faculties – an essay which one would hope is more widely known than the number of critical reviews it has received to date would suggest – and, secondly, the publication of Strauss's *Confession*.³ These very recent writings have prompted

1. This is a translation of Franz Overbeck, *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie* (1903) [first ed. 1873], reprinted by the *Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft*, Darmstadt, 1974), pages IX–XI (Foreword to the First Edition) and 21–42 (Chapter 1). Literally, the title reads: 'On the Christian Character of Our Present-day Theology'. In the first edition Overbeck had added the subtitle: 'A Polemical and Eirenical Tract', a subtitle omitted from the second edition. A more recent critical edition, based on the first edition of 1873 (Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlaß*, vol. 1: *Writings up to 1873*, in collaboration with Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub, ed. Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Niklaus Peter, Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1994, 155–318), has been of great assistance in the preparation of this translation. Footnotes preceded by one asterisk (*) are based, with some minor changes, on the above-mentioned Metzler critical edition (henceforth abbreviated as W/N). Those preceded by two asterisks (**) or material in square brackets stem from the present translator. All other footnotes are in Overbeck's own text. In the footnotes, Overbeck's text will be referred to as *Chr* or *Chr'*, or simply as *Chr*, if the difference of edition is irrelevant. Overbeck's general custom of putting proper names in italics (*Tertullian*, etc.) has not been followed in the translation. More significantly, some of his lengthy sentences and paragraphs have been broken up in an effort to make his thought clearer. For a brief introduction to Overbeck, see my article, 'Franz Overbeck: An Introduction', in *JTQ*, 65 (2000), 307–318. [M.H.]

2. Göttingen, 1873. Since then frequently reprinted, the last time by the author in his 'Deutsche Schriften', final complete edition, 2nd reprint (Göttingen, 1891), 37ff.

3. *D. Fr. Strauss, *Der alte und der neue Glaube. Ein Bekenntnis* (Leipzig, 1872) [ET: *The Old Faith and the New*, 1873]. Overbeck's own copy (A 404) contains in the end-paper the remark: 'Nietzsche got to know it from my copy when he was preparing [Strauss's] execution and he used it in carrying it out.' [Nietzsche attacked Strauss in the first of his *Untimely*

me at this juncture to publish my own views on modern theology; the views themselves are of course much older. Yet notwithstanding the need – which I have in fact felt for a long time – to state my views on the current theological parties, it would not have been difficult for me to keep them to myself for even longer. I had all kinds of very different reasons for holding back; above all I was afraid of jeopardising the proper treatment of a subject I consider important, by dealing with it prematurely. And I would not have overcome these hesitations, despite the strength of the reasons urging me to state in a more general sense how I stood *vis-à-vis* theology, had I not been compelled to do so by my official position as a teacher of theology. However, given that I felt compelled to write this tract, I don't think I need make any further apology for either having written it or for the way in which I have written it. Honesty surely has to be the first commandment for the author if he expects people to take seriously his motives for writing. At the same time, of course, I thought that – particularly with the practical suggestions at the end of my tract – I might now also perhaps be able to help others, especially young theologians, who are struggling with difficulties to which no teacher of theology or Church authority at the present time may shut their eyes.

The way in which I have distanced myself from the practical proposals of men who regard me as an academic colleague, and with whom I have, in some cases closer, in others more distant, personal relations, and whom I have to thank for being so well-disposed towards my own scholarly publications, only shows, I think, that in what I have written I have not been swayed by personal considerations.⁴ In writing this book, let me say further, it has not been in any sense my intention to turn my back on people with whom I have a genuine bond of common concerns. Indeed in everything I have said here my sincerest wish has been to help ensure that the unobtrusive role of critical thought in theology should not be endangered. Theology by its very nature makes this difficult enough as it is. However, it is my conviction that the role of critical thought in theology is at the moment under serious threat from certain tendencies within liberal theology, just at a time when the latter still has such enormous, unresolved questions to clarify across the whole spectrum of the history of

Meditations: 'David Strauss, the confessor and the writer' (1873). – A guide to Overbeck's unpublished papers (*Nachlass*) was published in 1962: *Überbeckiana. Übersicht über den Franz-Überbeck-Nachlass der Universitätsbibliothek Basel*, I. Teil: *Die Korrespondenz Franz Überbeck. Verzeichnisse, Regesten und Texte*, ed. in collaboration with M. Gabathuler by E. Staehelin (Basel, 1962, henceforth: *Überbeckiana*, I); II. Teil: *Der Wissenschaftliche Nachlass Franz Überbeck*, described by Martin Tetz (Basel, 1962). 'A 404', mentioned above, refers to an item from Overbeck's *Nachlass* catalogued in *Überbeckiana*, II.

4. *Overbeck is here referring to his critique, formulated in *Chr* 1, 57-69, esp. 64ff., of the project: 'The Bible for Protestants. New Testament' (1872), edited by P. W. Schmidt and the jurist E. von Holtzendorff. In the autumn of 1871 Overbeck had been invited by Schmidt to collaborate in the project. He accepted initially, but withdrew his acceptance in his letter to Schmidt of 15 January 1872 (printed in *Überbeckiana*, I, 97f.). ... Cf. N.

Christianity. I hope, in any case, that the reader who is not entirely hostile to this tract will not quarrel with its right to be called, despite its occasionally strident tone, not only a polemical but also an eirenical tract.⁵ I should, however, like to ask its opponents to remember above all that it is only concerned with the theoretical solution to the problem of the relationship between Christianity and the educated mind,⁶ and not with the thousands of practical compromises between them that we are faced with in daily life. Hence my judgements do not apply at all to lay people, but only to theologians, and chiefly to those theologians who stand at the lectern in universities, and write books. For I have no doubt that many a wise pastor will judge our present-day theological disputes for what they are worth and not get involved in them, but attend rather to the practical demands of his profession. I should not, however, have presumed to deny to present-day theological parties the right to call their theology Christian, as I have done in what follows, were I to claim unreservedly the title 'Christian' for my own theology, and were I not convinced that there are more serious reasons than is generally recognised for all of us theologians to be tolerant towards each other.

Basel, 16 May 1873.

F. Overbeck.⁷

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II. My Short Tract of 1873

Chapter 1. Theology's Fundamental Relationship to Christianity

Everywhere today the cry is heard loud and clear that not everything still called Christian really is so, and no one disputes the right at least to ask whether it is or not. Theology cannot just ignore this kind of question, no matter how uncomfortable it may find it. It certainly cannot regard the question as one it should not have to face, for theology does not live on an island cut off from the rest of the world. Indeed, if it is true that theologians are more directly called upon than anyone else to state clearly their position in regard to Christianity, it is also true that for no one else is this

5. This had appeared on the title-page of the first edition (see above, note 1).

6. **Bildung*, a quintessentially German term, is not easily translatable. None of the usual translations ('education', 'formation', or 'culture') quite captures the full meaning.

7. **After this *Foreword*, Overbeck inserted a 'Foreword to the Second Edition', which is followed by the first of the three main sections into which the second edition is divided. This first main section of the second edition is entitled: 'Introduction: How I came to write my short tract of 1873'. In this *Introduction*, dated 1902, Overbeck outlines his earlier intellectual development up to the publication of *Chr* 1 in 1873. His reflections include an interpretation of his friendship with Friedrich Nietzsche. The other two main sections of the

question more pressing. Before attempting, however, to answer our question in relation to present-day theology, it will be helpful first to look back and ascertain whether theology has ever had a claim on the title 'Christian'.

An assertion often made nowadays is that Christianity has a 'bias towards rational thought'.⁸ In order to be able to judge this statement, let us first of all establish the sense in which the term 'Christianity' is here being used. In the form in which it has reached modern peoples, Christianity is by no means only a religion, it is also a culture. As Greco-Roman antiquity felt its end draw near, it became Christian and, on its deathbed, got the strength to make us its heirs. Hence modern peoples received from one and the same source both the Christian religion and the culture of antiquity. And they received them both as a single composite structure. From this perspective one can also say that it was through being embalmed in Christianity that the culture of antiquity was preserved and handed down to us.

If this is what one means by Christianity, then the statement that it has a 'bias towards rational thought' makes no sense, for Christianity, so understood, already incorporates rational thought. However, if one takes Christianity to be what – according to its origins – it is, and what in the first instance it exclusively was, namely a religion, then nothing could be further from the truth, than the above statement. For, if Christianity is considered as a religion, then it is rather the case that Christianity, like every religion, has the most unambiguous *antipathy* towards rational knowledge. I say: 'like every religion', because the antagonism between faith and knowledge is permanent and absolutely irreconcilable. And so when in an otherwise instructive lecture that seeks to determine the boundaries between faith and knowledge – and does so with more seriousness and success than one normally expects from this kind of theological enterprise – it is nevertheless thought possible to point us to the religion,

8. **The German term is *Wissenschaft*, often translated 'science'. 'Science', however, in English tends to be associated almost exclusively with the natural sciences, whereas in German *Wissenschaft* can refer to a sustained search for knowledge in any area, provided that what is being sought is what is loosely called nowadays 'rational knowledge', i.e. critically controlled knowledge, or knowledge acquired by application of the 'scientific method' (as reflected, famously, in the title of Descartes's best-known work: *Discours de la méthode* [my underlining]). As J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall note in their helpful preface to the revised translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1998), xviii: 'The German *Wissenschaft* suggests thorough, comprehensive, and systematic knowledge of something on a self-consciously rational basis.' (This preface also contains brief and pertinent comments on other difficult German terms that occur in the text here translated, such as *Bildung* and *aufheben*.) In this translation, 'scholarship' has also been frequently used to translate *Wissenschaft* and related terms. Finally, on the question of how the use of the German term is now felt to be appropriate even in English. Speaking of one of the meanings of the term 'Europe' to emerge in the modern world, i.e. from roughly the seventeenth century onwards, he writes: "Europe" consisted of a now possible community of scholars or intellectuals engaged, across geographical borders, languages, state boundaries, administrative or personal feuds in the construction of a collective edifice, namely

'whose truth is not open to attack from knowledge', as the 'eternal' religion, 'which has nothing to fear from knowledge',⁹ even this is still to claim too much. It is like claiming to have found the philosophers' stone. But if the religion in question has not in fact taken its adherents beyond the boundaries of this world, then it is an idle claim.

So long as this does not happen, then the sphere of religion – whatever its origins may be – is the world. From the material of the world, religion creates its own forms,¹⁰ and can exist only in these forms, but for that very reason religion cannot avoid being explained away by scholarship. As for a religion which could in *no detectable way* be perceived in the lives of its adherents in this world, such a religion could only be judged not really to exist. And in that case it would only have no more fear of scholarship, because it was no longer alive. In truth, however, religions cannot avoid leaving themselves open to rational attacks, and hence it is only whenever they were strong enough to keep the latter at bay that they had no fear of rational thought.

And so in the case just mentioned there is really no point in characterising – as our lecture does with particular reference to the Christian religion – the religio-ethical life, 'which has been revealed as a reconciling and redemptive form of life in human history through Jesus, and has found expression in those touched by his personality', as something about which scholarship can never raise any doubts, since it 'in fact exists for all to see'. For as far as scholarship is concerned, what is at stake here, is not necessarily that the existence of a certain number of facts,¹¹ summarised under the name 'Christianity', might be put in doubt. Not at all. Rather what is at stake, is how these facts are to be explained. And if it is conceded that scholarship has the ability even to call into question 'whether the expression of this new redemptive life originated historically in the way hitherto assumed', then it has been granted all it needs to annihilate Christianity as a religion over and over again. If what up to now has been taken as the accepted description of the Christian religious life is surrendered to the scrutiny of scholarship, then assuming that some kind of comprehensible

9. Herm. Schultz, *Zu den kirchlichen Fragen der Gegenwart* [On contemporary questions in the Church] (Frankfurt a. M., 1869), 9. The author gives a reply to the above observations in the *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*, 1874 [Overbeck had inadvertently written: 1879].

44. I cannot share the idealism developed in this reply.
*HERMANN SCHULTZ (1836-1903). Professor of Old Testament and Dogmatics (in Basel until 1872), was involved in Overbeck's appointment to Basel; cf. C. P. Janz, 'Die Berufung Franz Overbecks an die Universität Basel 1870', in *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde*, 92 (1992), 139-165, and *Overbeckiana*, I, 86f. On H. Schultz, cf. E. Vischer: *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 17, 799-804. According to Schultz, 'the religio-ethical life, which has been revealed in the human race through Jesus as a reconciling and redemptive life and come to expression in those touched by his personality, is something about which scholarship can never raise any doubts' (p. 9).

10. *On the significance of 'forms' for Overbeck's thought, see especially M. Tetz, 'Über Formengeschichte in der Kirchengeschichte', *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 17 (1961), 413-431 (esp. 419-423, on *Chr*), and also id., 'Altchristliche Literaturgeschichte – Patrologie',

description of the faith in question can be given, that faith will be destroyed by rational examination. For any expression of the Christian faith that we chose to consider must somehow have arisen historically.¹² And this problem will go on and on for as long as and whenever scholarship gets a chance to investigate Christianity.

This, however, can only ever happen, when faith is too weak to live out of its own resources, begins to waver, and surrenders to rational examination what it itself, as faith, can no longer defend. Faith makes this move, either because it wishes to abandon some beliefs altogether, or because it wishes to have them ratified by scholarship. Either way, faith has lost its soul, for even in the more favourable case, it has become superfluous. A faith, in other words, which really exists in this world cannot escape rational scrutiny, except by a deliberate act of will. As soon, however, as rational thought is appealed to, we have something other than faith, and something that will forever remain other than faith.

For that reason too, then, in so far as theology brings faith into contact with scholarship, it is in itself and by its very nature¹³ always *irreligious*. And theology can only ever develop, where concerns alien to religion's own intrinsic interests emerge alongside the latter. Just how alien these concerns in fact are to religion, how opposed in particular the concerns of rational thought are to those of faith, we can see very clearly from the fact that the most essential of faith's basic assumptions and supports are the very first ones to collapse, and to collapse most comprehensively, when submitted to rational examination.

The most essential conviction, for instance, for any particular religion is that it is the only true one, but of no conviction will scholarship more surely rob it, than of this one. The believing Christian believes that Christianity (along with its forerunner¹⁴) is coextensive with the concept of religion, pronounces other religions false, and considers himself obliged to combat them. Examining the question impartially, the comparative study of religion recognises without any difficulty that Christianity fulfils for Christians exactly the same role as other religions fulfil for non-Christian peoples, and that no religion can combat any other without harming itself. And indeed early Christianity's own polemic against paganism furnishes us with the most spectacular examples of this phenomenon.

Or let us take miracles. Everyone knows, or at any rate can appreciate, that wherever a religion is absolutely dominant, miracles¹⁵ will increase 12. And thus be open to critical examination, and, in Overbeck's mind, destruction as 'religious' truth.

13. **I.e., because theology is, for Overbeck, an invalid amalgam (*Zusammensetzung*) of faith and knowledge.

14. *Viz. Judaism.

15. *Cf. D. Fr. Strauss: *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet* (Leipzig, 1864¹). XIX: 'He who would banish priests from the Church must first banish miracles from religion.'

Overbeck has a gloss on this in his own copy (A 405): 'then in fact banishing religion altogether, surely. [E: A *New Life of Jesus*, 2 vols. (London, 1865): cf. Hans Frei, 'David

the number of its adherents. But whenever rational thinking enters the fray, miracles will cause just as great a decrease in the number of that religion's adherents. The belief, for instance, that the skies would fall and the earth return to chaos as soon as anyone laid a hand on the image of Serapis¹⁶ in Alexandria reinforced the latter's religious standing for as long as this belief could be maintained. But when an ordinary Christian soldier, under Theodosius I, took his axe and smashed the image, with impunity, belief in the image's religious status was destroyed, and suddenly what until then had been shielded by an unquestioning and untestable faith and considered as miraculous, became something that could be fully explained and understood.¹⁷ [Among Christians themselves, Jesus' miracles may well have served as 'proof' in his favour; but against unbelievers he had to be defended for working miracles.¹⁸ For to unbelievers, miracles made Jesus seem like a magician ('goët'). To take another example: the miracle of transubstantiation, a foundation stone of faith that the Catholic Church hit upon in the Middle Ages, was at the same time a particularly fertile source of doubts against it.¹⁹ Indeed a religion's miracles harm it even in the eyes of another religion, as the example of the Christian Apologists shows; for the latter criticised the miracles of pagan mythology, remarking that such miracles could find credence only in the first and still utterly ignorant ages of mankind.²⁰ This is, by the way, also an instructive example of just how thoroughly religions can lose the sense of what they have in common, when they begin to attack each another.

Christianity's fortunes and experiences are the very last thing, however, that could lead us to think of the relationship between faith and knowledge as being less hostile than we have been saying. To begin with, original Christianity no more expected to have a theology than it expected to have any other kind of history on this earth. Indeed, Christianity entered this world announcing its imminent end. Now, although Christianity did in fact produce a theology more quickly than any other religion, it would be futile to try to explain this by arguing from any of Christianity's own fundamental tenets to a special elective affinity between Christianity and rational thought. Rather, if we look at the question from a completely different angle, we can find without too much difficulty a fully satisfactory explanation of what occurred.

Christianity was a new religion which found itself from the outset in a world that had attained a level of culture so high that it can rightly be asked whether humanity today has again reached it. Even Tertullian, who was particularly loath to look at Christianity from this kind of perspec-

16. *Cf. Sozomen, *Church History* VII, 15, 2ff. (GCS, 50, 319ff.).

17. **Literally: something that 'had entered into the sphere of knowledge'.

18. E.g., by Origen, *Contra Celsum*, II, 49, 52.

19. Cf. H. Reuter, *Geschichte der religiösen Aufklärung im Mittelalter*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1875, 1877), I, 165f. [The material in square brackets in the text above was added by Overbeck

tive, once stressed that what distinguished Christianity from the religious cults of earlier times, was that it was a religion for civilised people.²¹ In such a world, no matter how strong Christianity's basic religious impulses may have been, they still had the most powerful obstacles to contend with. It was, then, only very natural that at a relatively early stage Christianity should seek an accommodation with a world it was unable to destroy, and look for support in quarters where previously it had seen only danger and hostility. The struggle between faith and knowledge was fought out then almost in the very cradle of Christianity. With astonishing thoroughness, Gnosticism destroyed all the early Christian faith's historical presuppositions, turning it into a metaphysical system. But in so doing, it stripped Christianity of its popular character and abolished it as a religion. Notwithstanding this sobering experience, however, the early Church – in the East, at any rate – was unable, even in the very short term, to resist the desire for an accommodation with secular scholarship, which at that time was completely dominated by the Alexandrians. Instead of asserting all the more vigorously the complete autonomy of the simple faith in redemption through Christ, the Church set up Christian theology as the true Gnosis, alongside the Gnosis which had been suppressed and was now declared to be false. In this 'genuine Gnosis', it is true, at least a certain amount of Christian tradition was placed under the protection of faith and thus shielded from intellectual attacks. This was achieved above all by means of the establishment of the Christian canon. But at the same time, it should be noted, it was regarded as completely appropriate to move beyond the standpoint of faith to that of knowledge.

The sure proof, however, of the opposition between rational knowledge and the purely religious interests of faith is that scholarship, even in this attenuated form, was only able to establish itself in the Church with a kind of violence. And once established there, it only succeeded in holding its own by enduring the most jealous supervision and constantly running the risk of being accused of heresy whenever it attempted to operate in any way freely. And in fact it did turn out to be the breeding-ground of endless conflicts with the community's faith. Even the beginning of this process, as represented around the turn of the second and third centuries by Clement of Alexandria and after him, by Origen, is entirely typical of the whole development. That is to say, at this early stage things are certainly not as one would have expected them to be, if there really were an intrinsic relationship between Christianity and rational thought (a view we contest). For, with these earliest founders of Christian theology, it is not as if rational thought made its first, modest appearance in the Church, received a friendly welcome from faith, the older son of the family, and then continued to grow alongside faith, going from strength to strength. Rather, rational thought enjoyed in this period the highest level of power it ever attained over faith in the entire history of the early

21. *Apodicticum*, ch. 21.

Church, and in the following generations always kept being pushed further and further back, in fact, from the position it had initially captured.

This just goes to show – and to show very clearly – that rational theology was only forced on the Church by the earliest Alexandrians through an act of violence. Clement justified his establishment of a science of Christianity by appealing to the Greek philosophers, whose teachings he deemed to be more or less on a par with the religious teachings of the Old Testament. From the standpoint of early Christianity this was the most daring innovation, which as such was endorsed by no one at that time, with the exception of Gnostic teachers. And of course to the ecclesiastical epigones of the earliest Alexandrians, it could only appear as the worst possible kind of heresy. And yet it was this evaluation of Greek philosophy that Clement defended, even with scorn and derision, against the simple Christian faithful, who were reluctant to have anything at all to do with the traditions of Greek rationalism.

Origen, however, even in his own lifetime, came under strong attack for his teachings, which profoundly shook traditional Christian beliefs. It is true that his standing was fairly undisputed for most of the fourth century, a period when the Church began consolidating its position within the world of the Roman Empire, where it had just won acceptance, and in so doing could not yet very well ignore Origen's contribution to its theological system, since he had created it. Yet not long afterwards, Origen was counted among the worst heretics and anathematised over and over again, even though his work was to mark indelibly the generally accepted theology of the Church. So the early Church did indeed accept the fruits of the intellectual boldness of its first theologians, but did not allow anything remotely like as much, let alone more, leeway to any of their successors, and had no qualms even about consigning the memory of its earliest theologians to oblivion.²²

This is even true in Clement's case, in the sense that information about him more or less disappears in the Church after the time of Eusebius.²³ In fact, whether or not to permit a scholarly treatment of the articles of faith was to remain for the Church a permanently unsettled question. Origen himself,²⁴ even though he in fact asserted fairly regularly and always very emphatically his rights, as a man of learning, against simple believers (*aplois-teroi simpliciores*), nevertheless envied those very believers. For he concludes the foreword to his polemic against Celsus the pagan with the remark that it is of course best not to need any kind of refutation of Celsus at all; rather, it is best to be an ordinary Christian believer who by the power of the spirit within him can simply disregard Celsus' objections to Christianity.

22. **Literally: 'abandoning their persons'.

23. *For a more differentiated view of Clement's historical influence, cf. A. Méhat, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 8, 101–113, esp. 110f.

24. *Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 'Foreword', 6 (*Sources Chrétiennes*, 132, 74).

If this was how the greatest scholar of the early Church spoke, then it cannot surprise us to see Athanasius, for example, beginning the instruction a friend requested on the Christian faith, with the remark that such instruction was superfluous, since the Christian religion bore witness to itself by living realities. And it was only to prevent Christianity from being despised and to prevent the faith of Christians from being exposed to pagan ridicule on the grounds that it lacked any rational foundation – in other words for a very worldly motive – that Athanasius²⁵ finally agreed to comply with the request and to provide the desired instruction.²⁶ And even if, bearing in mind his own attitude, it was only a cliché of course when Chrysostom, like so many others, once said that there is nothing worse than using human standards of thinking to measure things divine,²⁷ nevertheless here too one feels that sense of unease about its theology which the early Church never lost.

There is no doubt that the sentence of condemnation that the early Church, with its ascetic ideals,²⁸ passed on all worldly values, is also aimed at theology. This was particularly so in the East where the Church had allowed itself to become deeply involved with the culture of the pre-Christian world. As a result, the Church's ascetic ideals manifested themselves with particular intensity in the East. The West managed to put up a much longer and more stubborn resistance to the intrusion of all systematically scholarly theology, and finally accepted theology, especially in its Origenist form, only from the hands of a frivolous man of letters,²⁹ Jerome, and even then still with great reluctance. Jerome did indeed become the founder of theological learning in the West, but, given his characteristic trait just mentioned, he was quite exceptionally well-suited to guarantee the superficiality or lack of seriousness of the learning he provided. And furthermore, the Christian community's passionate aversion to theology coincided with a time when the illusion that there could be a theology with a *purely apologetical* relationship to the Christian faith, was a possibility. Indeed it was probably only this illusion that could have enabled the Church to overcome its fear of theology. Both the existence of this illusion in the early Church and its real possibility at that time, are

25. *In Basel Overbeck began a translation of Athanasius' *Oratio contra gentes* (A 145), which broke off in chapter two.

26. *Against the Pagans*, ch. 1 (**Contra gentes*, 1).

27. *Werke* IX, 665, B. Montfaucon. [*Opera omnia*, 13 vols., ed. B. de Montfaucon with revisions by G.R.L. von Sinner, Paris, 1834–1840; the Metzler edition gives *Werke* XI.]

28. *On this question, cf. the 'Introduction and Text' of *Ueber die Anfänge des Mönchtums* [*On the Beginnings of Monasticism*, in *WN*, vol. 1, 1–37], and also Klaus Berger, *Evangelie und Philosophie* (Stuttgart, 1986), 75.

29. *On Overbeck's negative picture of Jerome, see his *Ueber die Auffassung des Streits des Paulus mit Petrus in Antiochien* (*Gal. 2. 11ff.*) bei den Kirchenvätern (Basel, 1877), 47–70, esp. 49, and in more detail his 'Aus dem Briefwechsel des Augustin mit Hieronymus', in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 42, Neue Folge 6, (1879), 222–259, passim, 233 and 253; both are reprinted in *WN*, vol. 2.

beyond doubt. For this illusion emerged in a period³⁰ that witnessed the most rapid and indisputable decline of all branches of learning.³¹ And it became especially possible in the Middle Ages. This was the period when Christianity, combined with Greco-Roman learning, passed to the barbarian peoples whose migrations had brought them into contact with the Roman Empire, and when the Church had absolutely all branches of learning under her control. And yet even here the relationship between faith and knowledge that developed only remained peaceful so long as the power of the state, which was now subordinate to the Church, provided the means to ensure that it would.

If we confine ourselves now for the moment to the early Church and the Middle Ages, we can see it is obvious that in those periods rational thought, unlike Christian faith, was merely tolerated. Furthermore, Christianity's whole worldview intensifies in its case the general antipathy³² all religions feel towards rational knowledge. Hence, it is almost incomprehensible how anyone could ever have said that Christianity had a bias towards rational thought. The truth, of course, is that this way of talking is built-in to theology itself, and indeed owes its origin to theology's concern to delude itself about its own nature. For those who consider the question dispassionately, the facts of the matter are clear enough: Christianity only acquired a theology when it wanted to gain a foothold in a world it was supposed to have rejected. This thesis would still be correct, even if one were to see theology as deriving in the most unqualified way one could think of from Christianity's own religious concerns. Were one to say, for instance, that, in order to safeguard itself against corruption, Christianity had to develop a theology that, in looking back to its beginnings, would always keep the memory of its origins clear – even had this been the case, theology would still be seen as resulting from a weakness in Christianity which is inseparable from its existence in the world. But to imagine theology emerging in this way would be in any case quite false. For, right at the very beginning, i.e. in the earliest Christian theology of Alexandria, it is as clear as it can possibly be that theology was looking in a completely different direction, and that with its theology Christianity wanted to commend itself also to the wise³³ of this world, and to win their approval. Regarded in this way, however,

30. On the obstacles which rational thought finds blocking its path time and again in this period when it tries to get into the Church, Augustine's prologue to his *Treatise: 'On Christian learning* [*Wissenschafft*] is also very instructive (on this translation of the Augustinian original *De doctrina christiana*, see my *Zur Geschichte des Kanons*, Chemnitz – now Tübingen and Leipzig –, 1880, 47). Augustine has to make apologies for attempting to give rational instruction about the inspiration of Scripture, and for not leaving the understanding of Scripture to God's inspiration of each individual.

31. *Cf. E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 2; cf. also on this question R. Koselleck and P. Widmer (eds.), *Niedergang. Studien zu einem geschichtlichen Thema* (Stuttgart, 1980).

32. *In the first edition this phrase reads: 'every religion's natural antipathy'.
33. *Cf. Mt. 11:25.

theology was nothing other than an aspect of the secularisation of Christianity. It was a luxury Christianity indulged in, but as with every luxury, it has to be paid for.

If the confusions of the early and medieval Church do not enlighten us on just how expensive this particular luxury is, then our eyes should certainly be opened by the evidence of modern times which have seen the total collapse of all those illusions about rational thought, mentioned already, that in earlier times were still possible. Scholarship has now emancipated itself entirely from the Church. It develops its own methods of argumentation, applying them without any regard for aims that lie outside the sphere of scholarship. In practice, not a single one of its disciplines defers to the needs of Christianity. All are completely unconcerned about any possible conflicts with traditional Christian ideas, and least of all are they deterred by the actual accumulation of such conflicts. Now, since theology, in so far as it is a scholarly discipline, has no epistemological principles of its own, but can only get them from, if it is in no position to dictate them to, other disciplines, not even the delusion that theology is 'Christian scholarship'³⁴ can be entertained any longer.

For, if it is now clear to everyone that there simply is no such thing as 'Christian scholarship', then it also follows that theology cannot continue to think of itself as 'Christian scholarship'. And in saying that, it is of no significance whatsoever that theology's aim is not purely scholarly. The fact that theology contains a scholarly element at all is what counts. For the nature of the scholarly element in theology is determined not by theology's own aim, but by what 'scholarship' means in the world at large. But now, if Christianity has basically always been an intellectual problem for theology, and never more so than today, then it is surely no longer possible to ignore that what this means is that theology makes Christianity as a religion problematic, i.e. it calls its very status as a religion into question. And this is in fact true of every kind of theology, whatever its results may be. For even apologetical theology, assuming its conclusions were honestly reached, would still be every bit as dangerous for Christianity as critical theology, since even apologetical theology, were it to prove that Christianity could be known to be true, would destroy it as a religion.

There is nothing of course that theology continues more stubbornly to deny than this fact, but it can only be doubted by those whose false theological idealism, which thinks that religion can be indifferent to its own characteristic forms and expressions, we have already rejected. Meanwhile, however, modern theology³⁵ itself is utterly incapable of producing anything even remotely resembling a religion. Now a religion need not be particularly concerned about the myths it has created, so long

34. **Inverted commas added for clarity.

35. *In the margin of his own copy of *Chr!* ... Overbeck wrote with reference to 'modern theology': 'That's what it later called itself at the actual height of its self-importance' (quoted in the *Antiquarisch-katalog Erasmusheuts Basel*, 6 June 1966, 29).

as its myth-forming power³⁶ remains a living force, i.e. so long as the miraculous forces that produced its basic myth continue to live on within it. It is no secret that in the Christian world these forces have long since been defunct. In fact they have been extinct for as long as there has been a Christian theology. And as the Christian myth had at an even earlier stage already been turned into a fixed, rigid tradition, we find the historical interpretation of that myth, especially of the canonical documents in which it was expressed, being practised quite early on in the Christian community.

But the superstition that a sacred document's religious authority could be preserved by historical interpretation alone had not yet occurred to the early Church, which had found in the allegorical interpretation of Scripture a kind of substitute for the myth that was itself no long alive. Our present-day theology, on the other hand, not only has lost contact completely with every interpretation of Christian religious texts apart from the historical, but – and this is almost incomprehensible – it has actually deluded itself into thinking that it can establish the truth of Christianity again historically. And yet, were this project to succeed, it would at most produce a religion for scholars, that is to say, nothing that could seriously be likened to a real religion, something that would have about as much existential truth as the 'cerebral religion' which nowadays has a hold on many people's minds and – we are even told – is supposed to have 'ousted for good the religion of faith', in the case 'of all who are really educated and discerning'.³⁷

Although theology believes it serves religion, in essence it is by nature alien to religion. Nothing in fact reveals this more clearly than the over-estimation of historical study for theology's positive aims, which is currently so widespread. And similarly, nothing can show more clearly how, for theology, times have changed. Theology has lost its position of intellectual dominance and has become subordinate to scholarship. In fact theology is now of even less significance than a handmaid (*ancilla*), in the sense that it could possibly fulfil an ancillary role, but its services are just not required.

It is, of course, also what we have here referred to as the underestimation of the significance of religion's mythical forms, and overestimation of the significance of its historical foundations, that permits theology to interpret the relationship between faith and knowledge so superficially as to disguise its own relationship to religion, and to declare, for instance, rather too blithely, that no scientific discovery can in any way affect the Christian faith.³⁸ Such an assertion is contradicted daily by the facts

36. *Fr. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ch. 17 (*Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* in 15 vols., ed. Colli/Montinari, Munich, 1980, I, 113f.) speaks of the 'myth-creating power of music' and of its 'myth-forming spirit'; cf. on this question N. Peter, *Im Schatten der Modernität*, 202-210.

37. O. Henne Am Rhyn, *Kulturgeschichte der neueren Zeit*, vol. III (Leipzig, 1872), 548f.

38. W. Beyschlag, *Ein antiker Spiegel für den neuen Glauben* von D. F. Strauss, vol. I, 30f.

themselves, in the sense that every historical or scientific discovery of any significance which has a connection with Christian doctrine or myth gives rise to controversy on the point at issue and turns believers³⁹ into sceptics. But again – in trying to reassure the latter – even explicitly apologetical theologians do not take the problem very seriously. One of their number, for instance, assures Strauss, in relation to the Mosaic creation story, that 'for a long time now, no intelligent Christian has taken this literary illustration of the religious idea of creation – which self-evidently was based on ancient Hebrew notions of natural history – to be revealed natural science.'⁴⁰ The Christian for whom such an interpretation of the Mosaic creation story is so 'self-evident' may indeed be reasonably intelligent – though in earlier times it would have been less likely to occur to some very intelligent people – but it would be even more intelligent of him to abandon the idea that such an interpretation is religious. For while it is of course true that the religious person is not in the first instance concerned about natural science in the Bible, yet neither does he reflect on the fact that there is none to be found there.

It is, however, particularly worth noting that it is the same people, who so unhesitatingly surrender the creation story to rationalist criticism, who nowadays often defend the literal authenticity of many New Testament stories, e.g. the resurrection stories, as something sacrosanct. In doing so, they use the most unbridled invective against any kind of critical questioning, and are not bothered by the fact that they have only the wooden shield of historical proof to wield in their battle. Were they to place less trust in this shield, they would probably be more wary about making any such distinctions within the canon, because the religious authority of the canon rests on the equal status of all of its parts. If this is surrendered, then in order to prove why, for instance, the resurrection stories should not be assessed critically, but the creation story should, one has to fall back on the possibility of historical testimony. Now it must, of course, be admitted that such a possibility is at least somewhat more likely with regard to the course of events at the resurrection which, according to the tradition, occurred at the beginning of the Christian era, than it is with regard to the course of events at the creation of the world. But one should be under no illusions about the purely rational and irreligious character of this whole way of looking at things. For in one case the very same approach which gives rise to doubt about the word of Scripture, in the other case supports faith in it, whereas for someone who really believes in Scripture the testimony of the Bible in the case of both stories under discussion is of equal value.

One would also find it incomprehensible that the discoveries of science could be described – particularly from the kind of viewpoint argued against here – as not being a problem for Christianity, were one not to

notice over and over again just how easy for this theology the job of patching up religious faith appears to be, a job science has now finally forced upon theology. To take an example, the same theologian, mentioned above, whose objections to Strauss we began with, offers the following information to reassure 'Christian faith', in the event of Darwin's theory being proved true: 'We would then simply say,' he argues, 'that that miracle-cell which appeared on only one single occasion, containing in embryo the whole future world of plants, animals, and human beings, must surely be the greatest conceivable testimony to God's glory as Creator; that the gradual, planned evolution of all the possibilities placed in this original cell and striving towards the emergence of man, is one of the strongest proofs of the fact that the course of reality is governed not by blind chance, but by divine intelligence and will, and finally, that the last step in this evolution, the step from animal to man, could certainly only have been accomplished by God breathing something of his own personal spirit into the animal form most fit to receive it.'⁴¹ Such statements show that even a theologian can be naive, or rather – on the point here at issue – as a rule, they all are.

Who, then, does our apologist expect to believe these crude flights of fancy? What serious person, at any rate, does he expect to? For of course there is never any shortage of others, who are open to having even this kind of thing palmed off on them. The believer acquires his convictions about the creation of the world and of man from the Bible, because for him this book has religious, divine authority. Now it is true that a similar kind of authority is not necessary for the believer's faith to be shaken, but it is necessary for it to be restored. From where does Professor Beyschlag acquire the authority to tell us how, assuming Darwin's theory to be true, God proceeded at creation? The Bible says nothing about it, nor does Darwin's theory, which, incidentally, does not speak about a 'miracle-cell'⁴² but only⁴³ about an 'original cell'. Are the first ideas that come to mind on these subjects really supposed to be able to teach us what neither the Bible nor Darwin's theory can? It goes without saying that a theology which glosses over the conflict between faith and knowledge, producing only a revolting mixture of half-knowledge and half-belief, can indulge endlessly in delusions about its own nature, but it is really the most worthless verbiage ever produced, for it consists in fact only of the words that invariably fill the vacuum, whenever thinking and believing have ceased.

Such superficial attempts at reconciling faith and knowledge make it absolutely clear that knowledge can certainly destroy a religion, but it can never build it up again as a religion. Christian theology in its older periods, when knowledge was in a state of atrophy, offers no proof against

41. Beyschlag, loc. cit., 35.

42. *Beyschlag uses, incidentally, the expression 'miracle-cell' only at this point, otherwise he uses the concept 'original cell' throughout.

43. *The word 'only' was added to *Ch^h*.

39. **Ch^h*, at this point, but not *Ch^h*, has 'Glaubigen' ('Glaubigen').

40. W. Beyschlag, loc. cit., 31.

this thesis, while in the modern period it proves it, though not so much by the devastation science has caused in the area of Christian faith, as by the sterility of theology's own attempt, undertaken in response, to reconstruct the Christian religion by means of pure scholarship. One should bear in mind, therefore, that the expression 'Christian theology' refers only to the *practical* scholarly discipline that deals with the task of all the-ology, which is to draw lines of demarcation between secular culture and religion, and, with particular reference to Christianity, to place each in relation to the other. However, the actual scholarly character of Christian theology can have no direct claim on the title 'Christian'. The more the vindication of Christianity as a religion is considered to be a matter of general human concern, the more it will involve all branches of learning, as was the case in days gone by, or none at all, as is the case at the present time, when even for theology the pretence of doing so can no longer be sustained.

But if we have established in general terms that theology *per se* contains an irreligious element, and hence also that Christian theology contains an unchristian element, then we are ideally placed to grasp what we now want to observe in today's main theological parties: namely, that – of all people – it is theologians who can turn Christianity into something which – whatever else it may be – is no longer Christianity.