Franz Overbeck on Carl Albrecht Bernoulli

In 1897 Franz Overbeck’s\(^1\) pupil, C.A. Bernoulli,\(^2\) published a long essay on his ideas for a new method in theology, entitled Die wissenschaftliche und die kirchliche Methode in der Theologie. Ein enzyklopädischer Versuch (The Academic and the Church-Based Method in Theology. A General Essay). On the first blank page of his own copy of this book,\(^3\) Overbeck in the same year wrote some brief comments on this work, which are here translated. Part of the interest of this short piece lies in the concise and candid statement it contains of Overbeck’s fundamental attitude to theology and Christianity. In the following few years, he added, again in his own copy of the book, a further few comments to the remarks he had initially written. All but one of these additions are also translated here. The original German text follows below after the translation.

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

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\(^2\) Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (1868–1937) taught church history as a privat-docent in Basel from 1895–97. The publication of Die wissenschaftliche und die kirchliche Methode in der Theologie (in 1897) ended his university career temporarily. Subsequently, he lived as a free-lance writer in Paris, London, and Berlin, before returning to Switzerland in 1906, settling in Arlesheim, near Basel. In 1922 he was again a privat-docent in Basel, for the history of religion; in 1926 he became associate professor for church history (see N. Peter, art. ‘Bernoulli, Carl Albrecht’, in \textit{Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz}, vol. 2, (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2003), 312f.).

\(^3\) Now in the possession of the translator. The book contains a loose sheet on which Overbeck initially sketched out his comments, before writing them into the first blank page of Bernoulli’s \textit{Essay}. The additions were written on the reverse side of the first blank page, and on the final blank page at the back of the book.
way of understanding religion in general. In writing my tract, I felt no hatred or aversion to either the church or Christianity. They were never a thorn in my flesh. I have never experienced them as in any way oppressive. If there is anything in the tract I am referring to, against which I do harbour any such negative feelings, then it is theology (and to that extent, of course, the church too). I certainly do not wish to have anything personally to do with theology any more. I wish, rather, to be free of it, in order to get on with my own work. Indeed, as far as theology is concerned, I don’t care two hoots about it. And if that is how everyone now regards my attitude towards theology, then that is fine by me. The role that the church and Christianity play in the world 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 been anything but harmful; it is something that I, at any rate, want nothing to do with, and consequently do not recommend anyone else to get involved with either.

Now on this very question, Bernoulli, who is supposed to be my pupil, shows in this ‘General Essay’ that he has not even begun to understand what my position is. I myself, of course, never dreamt – until it actually happened – that I would one day be asked to sponsor an ‘endeavour’ like Bernoulli’s. Furthermore, to count me among prophets of Lagarde’s ilk, I can only regard as an appalling misunderstanding, one I did not intend, nor, I think, could be held responsible for. As far as the two of us (Lagarde and myself) were concerned, my tract certainly did not bring us any closer together. As

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time went on, we gradually just grew further and further apart. Lagarde’s
taste for rhetoric was something I could never warm to. I eventually came to
find it utterly repugnant. What he did not like in me, I have never had an
opportunity to discover; except that he let anyone interested in hearing such
comments know that he had nothing, or at least nothing more, to do with me – and, furthermore, he mentioned this as something that was generally
acknowledged. (July 1897).*  

[*The gist of these remarks I myself ‘intimated’ orally to the author of
this book, during his stay in Basel in January 1902. This was, naturally,
after a lot had already happened to enable us to understand each other’s
position better (especially when we had a week-long get-together in the
Vosges in August 1900), and after the author himself had done a lot –
especially from the time he took leave of absence as a privat-docent in
theology in the autumn of 1897 – to break away from the approach to
theology he had followed in this work. (September 1902). Cf. now my How
Christian is Our Present-day Theology?, 2nd edition (Leipzig, 1903), 198f.]  

I am also happy to see that certain individual reviewers of Bernoulli’s
book (W. Herrmann and also F. Hubert) have appealed to me, in their
discussion of his work, against Lagarde. I should just like to have a better
idea how Herrmann himself proposes to get rid of his own penchant for

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5 This asterisk refers to the following note that Overbeck subsequently added to his
original comments on Bernoulli’s book.
6 I.e. Bernoulli’s Essay.
7 Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922), a ‘Liberal Protestant’, was a disciple of Albrecht
Ritschl’s (1822–1889), and a teacher of both Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann in
Marburg.
rhetoric, even if his rhetoric is not quite as self-indulgent as Lagarde’s. (13 May ‘98).

Cf. F. Hubert, *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* (1898), col. 621, where he says that Bernoulli has ‘not yet learnt anything from the excellent critique of Lagarde by his teacher Franz Overbeck.’

Bernoulli’s book is taken up by G. Krüger in his essay ‘Unchristian Theology’ (*Die christliche Welt* 34, 1900, cols. 804ff.), an essay combining the paradoxical and the trivial in a masterly fashion that is to be found, not infrequently, in the writings of ‘modern theologians’ in particular.

Roughly at the same time as Bernoulli, W. Wrede published *The Task and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology’* (Göttingen, 1897; 80 pages). This work appears to me, at a quick glance, to have a strikingly close affinity with Bernoulli’s. The kind of questions they deal with seem to have become a fashionable subject of discussion among today’s educated theological youth. It’s a bad sign when the youth wants to instruct us in questions of ‘method’! Not much can be expected from such works beyond seeing in

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8 Gustav Krüger (1862–1940), church historian, who taught in Giessen from 1886 until his retirement in 1927, was sympathetic to ‘Liberal Protestantism’ (which is what Overbeck has in mind in referring to ‘modern theologians’), one of whose principal organs was the journal, *Die christliche Welt* (1877ff.). His views on theology were discussed by Bernoulli in his Essay. Overbeck’s letters to Krüger were published by the latter: ‘Overbeckiana’, *Theologische Blätter* 15 (1936), cols. 100–104.

them the expression of a certain dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, and that might still be the best thing about them.

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German original of the above translation:\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{10} In Overbeck’s German text, abbreviations have here been removed, the spelling modernized, proper names given in roman script, titles of books and journals in italics (in the original, the opposite is the case), and some punctuation added for the sake of clarity.


Auch sehe ich gern von einzelnen Rezensenten Bernoullis (W. Herrmann und auch F. Hubert) mich bei ihm gegen Lagarde aufgerufen. Wüsste ich nur von Herrmann besser, wo er selbst die Rhetorik los wird,

11 See above, n. 5.


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12 This has been changed from ‘noch nicht von gelernt’, which seems to be a slip of the pen.