Franz Overbeck: An Introduction

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

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

1. This article was written as a brief introduction to Franz Overbeck's life and thought, to accompany a translation of the first chapter (preceded by the `Foreword to the First Edition') of Overbeck's short book Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie (1873, second ed. 1903). The translation is to appear in the next issue of the ITQ. In the body of the following article, the title of Overbeck's book — after its first mention — has been abbreviated to Christlichkeit, and in the footnotes it has been abbreviated to Chr (Chr' or Chr, where the difference in edition is significant). Quotations from Chr are taken from the second edition of 1903 (reprinted in 1974 by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt). A new critical edition of Overbeck's 'Works and Unpublished Writings', planned in nine volumes, started to appear in 1994 (Franz Overbeck, Werke und Nachläß in neun Bänden, ed. Eckehard W. Stegemann et al., Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1994f, hereafter abbreviated to WN). The first volume of this project contains a critical edition of Chr, based on the first edition of 1873 (WN, Vol. 1, S. 28–293, ed. E.W. Stegemann and Niklaus Peter in collaboration with Marianne Stauffacher-Schaub, 1994, 55–318).

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

3. Chr', 212.


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

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To conclude this brief introduction to Overbeck's life and thought, a brief outline of his biography may be helpful. Overbeck's background was not that of a typical nineteenth-century German theologian, which tended to be clerical or academic. He was born in St Petersburg in 1837, the son of a German Protestant father and a French Catholic mother, and raised in the Lutheran confession of his father.
He died in Basel in 1905, a post he held until his early retirement in 1897 (associate professor), a post he held until his early retirement in 1897. His story in Basel, and in the following year was appointed full professor of History at Basel, and in the following year was appointed full professor of History at Basel and in the following year was appointed full professor of History at Basel.