

“National Ascendency and Intellectual Degeneracy:  
Nietzsche’s and Overbeck’s Cultural Criticisms of Modern Germany”

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In January 1871 Germany secured its national unification with victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War. Many Germans viewed the outcome of the war as evidence of not only their military superiority, but also their cultural supremacy. Scholars, politicians, and newspaper columnists popularized ideas of German primacy, which reinforced an increasingly pervasive spirit of optimism and patriotism. Germans interpreted their success as evidence of their national destiny.

Such confidence, however, was not unanimous. In 1873 two professors from the University of Basel expressed their contempt for the German cultural status quo from the city on the Rhine that German historian Heinrich von Treitschke once referred to as the “sulking corner of Europe.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper concerns those two allegedly petulant professors: Friedrich Nietzsche, Chair of Greek Languages and Literature, and Franz Overbeck, Chair of New Testament Theology and Church History, and their respective works *David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer* and *The Christianity of our Present-Day Theology*, jointly published as “twins” in 1873. Both texts served as critiques of the burgeoning nationalist cultural, political, and for Overbeck, theological ideologies of modern Germany.

In the spring of 1869 the University of Basel was in the market for a new professor of philology as their own Professor Adolf Kiessling had recently accepted a more prestigious position in Germany. Basel sought the advice of Friedrich Ritschl, a famous professor of philology at the University of Leipzig, regarding the appointment. Ritschl confidently proclaimed that his own student Nietzsche was the best candidate for the job, and went so far as to publicly wager his professional reputation on Nietzsche’s

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<sup>1</sup> Gossman, “Antimodernism in Nineteenth-Century Basle: Franz Overbeck’s Antitheology and J.J. Bachofen’s Antiphilology,” p. 366.

potential. Despite only having recently received his doctorate, and without having formally defended a dissertation, Nietzsche was appointed Chair of Greek Language and Literature at the University of Basel in March 1869 at the age of twenty-four.<sup>2</sup>

In 1870, within a year of Nietzsche's hiring, the University of Basel appointed Franz Overbeck—age thirty-three—as Chair of New Testament Theology and Church History.<sup>3</sup> Overbeck earned his academic credentials at the University of Jena. An expert on the history of the early church, one of Overbeck's lifelong research interests was the secular and institutional development of the Christian church since the time of the Apostles. After one year, Overbeck was promoted to a full professorship and he remained at Basel until retiring in 1897.<sup>4</sup> Overbeck was never completely comfortable with his role as a teacher of theology since he was disinclined to personal religious belief, and perhaps dogmatism above all. Privately, Overbeck confided that “The best school for learning to doubt the existence of God as ruler of the world is church history” and insisted that there was “nothing miraculous” about the Church overall.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, he was grateful for his post and the intellectual freedom it granted him.

Despite their onerous teaching loads and various bureaucratic responsibilities, Nietzsche and Overbeck quickly became close friends, were nearly inseparable, and almost always took their meals together in Overbeck's room over both intellectual and

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<sup>2</sup> Lionel Gossman, *Basel In The Age Of Burckhardt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 413.

<sup>3</sup> To clarify, Nietzsche's and Overbeck's appointments to “Chair” positions simply meant that they were appointed to regular professorships, not to the head of their respective academic departments.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Henry, “Franz Overbeck: An Introduction,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 65 (2000): p. 318.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Karl Barth's *Theology and Church; Shorter Writings, 1920-1928* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 60.

lighthearted discussions. It wasn't long before they discovered their common contempt for current German political and cultural affairs. The two scholars, it should be noted, were not always hostile towards Germany and its political and military aspirations: Nietzsche had served as a volunteer medic in the Prussian Army and viewed the Franco-Prussian War as an opportunity to protect classic German culture. Overbeck had also championed German unification, and even voluntarily assisted with efforts to garner support for the war among Prussians living in Switzerland during his first year in Basel.<sup>6</sup> However, the two scholars soon became disillusioned with the nationalist overtones that became increasingly prevalent in German intellectual and cultural life after the war, particularly with David Friedrich Strauss's publication of *The Old Faith and the New* in 1872.

Both Nietzsche and Overbeck abhorred the appropriation of classic German culture (including individuals such as Goethe and Beethoven) as proof of national sophistication. The exercise of military might in the Franco-Prussian War did not give men such as D.F. Strauss the license to lay claim to Prussia's distinguished intellectual history. In fact, Nietzsche and Overbeck viewed such appropriations as demonstrations of vain cultural philistinism—a term repeatedly employed in their texts of 1873. For both thinkers, Strauss's *The Old Faith and the New* served as a philistine case in point.

Philistinism is a concept traditionally associated with a lack of cultural knowledge or sophistication, and that is essentially what Nietzsche and Overbeck intended in their usage of the term. Specifically, Nietzsche defined a contemporary German philistine as one who was cognizant of, but still obstinately denied, the incongruity between their own

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<sup>6</sup> Gossman, *Basel In The Age Of Burckhardt*, p. 420.

superficial pretensions to modern sophistication and Germany's eminent cultural history.<sup>7</sup> Such philistines "covered their eyes and stopped their ears" and distinguished themselves by misappropriating past German cultural titans for petty modern purposes and a glorification of the material status quo.<sup>8</sup> For Nietzsche, David Strauss was the quintessential example, and he sardonically proclaimed "This is the age of...philistine confessions" and "David Strauss has confessed with a book."<sup>9</sup>

In *The Old Faith and the New*, Strauss pompously proclaimed the tenets of a new religion suited for a modern era defined by scientific advancement, cultural sophistication, and national unification. Strauss praised the positive developments of modernity and venerated Germany's political, industrial, and military advancements; Nietzsche lamented them as evidence of cultural decay. Nietzsche sought to prove that, contrary to popular belief, culture could not simply be purchased or gained through conquest. For Nietzsche, this "great victory" had produced a "great danger" — the Reich was rising while bona fide German culture was in perilous decline.<sup>10</sup> "The Straussian philistine," he proclaimed, "lodges in the works of our great poets and composers like a worm which lives by destroying, admires by consuming, and reveres by digesting."<sup>11</sup>

In a modern materialist age, Strauss insisted on replacing the old monotheistic God with a "new faith" grounded in philosophic positivism and nationalist enthusiasm. Nietzsche concluded that Strauss's work established no "new faith" but was merely a trite manifesto of modern science and artificial culture. To Nietzsche it was a pathetic philistine effort

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

that mocked Germany's intellectual past: *The Old Faith and the New* offered only superficial answers to complex scientific, cultural, and societal questions. The fact that it received glowing reviews and ran through twelve editions was an ominous but unequivocal sign of German cultural decline.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas Nietzsche targeted German culture and Strauss, Overbeck's text primarily focused on recent developments in modern German theology, specifically its increasingly national and ideological tone. In his introduction to the original edition of 1873, Overbeck maintained that his text concerned the modern individual's understanding of the relationship between Christianity and culture: what should the modern individual consider Christianity to be – an authentic religion or a past cultural tradition? What role should Christianity serve in modern society?<sup>13</sup> However, he also contended that he wrote *The Christianity of Our Present-Day Theology* with the purpose of repudiating two particular works of modern theology: Paul de Lagarde's *On the Relationship of the German State to Theology, Church, and Religion* and Strauss's *The Old Faith and the New*.<sup>14</sup>

With the publication of Lagarde's and Strauss's books, as well as the general proliferation of other modern theological studies he considered a "heap of rubble," Overbeck hoped his work would serve as a beacon for what he perceived to be the dark future of modern German theology. Overbeck loathed Lagarde's ideas pertaining to the study of modern theology in German universities, particularly his notion that theological faculties ought be free of denominational distinction and thus teach a nationalist religion

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Overbeck, *How Christian Is Our Present-Day Theology?*, trans. Martin Henry (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

rooted in the glorification of the state.<sup>15</sup> Overbeck disdained Lagarde's conception of an ideological religion where theology was used as a means to justify and exalt the German nation. Authentic Christianity based on the New Testament, Overbeck asserted, was unconditionally apolitical.

To understand Overbeck's critique of modern German theology, it is important to clarify Overbeck's conception of true Christianity. According to Overbeck, Christianity, in its authentic primitive form, was the worldview of an otherworldly sect that could only properly exist in its original context; Christianity was an ascetic way of life defined by an apocalyptic worldview. Its disciples believed in the imminent return of Christ and an immediately ensuing apocalypse. The original Christians were unconcerned with other political or cultural dynamics — their worldview was consummate and complete.

Thus, modern theology's blessings of contemporary secular culture, particularly in Lagarde's and Strauss's works, contradicted early Christianity's otherworldliness. The ancients' faith in Christ and the moderns' faith in culture fundamentally distinguished true Christianity from its modern inauthentic manifestation.<sup>16</sup>

Like Nietzsche, Overbeck found the optimistic tone of Strauss's new "faith" spurious and insisted that its attempt to establish a new worldly religion for modernity was shallow and oblivious to the true conditions of humanity and the primitive Christians.<sup>17</sup> *The Old Faith and the New* presented serious matters casually—as nothing

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian? Religion and History in the Thought of Franz Overbeck* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Gossman, "Antimodernism in Nineteenth-Century Basle: Franz Overbeck's Antitheology and J.J. Bachofen's Antiphilology," p. 373.

<sup>17</sup> Overbeck, *The Christianity of Our Present-Day Theology*, p. 112.

more than “news items of the day.”<sup>18</sup> According to Overbeck, Strauss’s book failed to grasp Christianity’s true essence but only superficially attacked the religion’s dogmas and doctrines.<sup>19</sup> In sum, Overbeck lambasted Strauss’s chauvinism, his blurring of religious piety with ideological devotion, and insisted that humans could achieve existential fulfillment independently of nationalist sentiment: “Whoever stands truly and firmly on his own two feet in the world must have the courage to stand on nothing.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1927, Martin Heidegger acknowledged the common critical spirit of Nietzsche’s and Overbeck’s “twins” and insisted on their unanimity in “speaking, questioning, and creating.”<sup>21</sup> Though Nietzsche and Overbeck had been dead twenty-seven and twenty-two years respectively, their works of 1873 were finally perceived as I have argued them to be — united works of cultural criticism that diagnosed and deconstructed the superficial edifices of modern German culture in light of national unification and a flexing of military muscle. In this light, Nietzsche’s essay is properly read as a warning to Strauss and other panderers to German nationalism and philistinism to “keep their paws off” their nation’s cultural heritage; as Overbeck wrote to the German nationalist historian Treitschke, those grapes were too high for them.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> Gossman, *Basel In The Age Of Burckhardt*, p. 423.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Foreword to the German Edition of Phenomenology and Theology* (Quoted from James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo, *The Piety of Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976)).

<sup>22</sup> Lionel Gossman, “Antimodernism in Nineteenth-Century Basle: Franz Overbeck’s Antitheology and J.J. Bachofen’s Antiphilology,” *Interpretation*, 16, 3, (1989), p 374.